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"He smiled down at her glowing young face, and his eyes shone with admiration" [Page 26]

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The Delafield Affair

By FLORENCE FINCH KELLY

Author of "With Hoops of Steel," Etc.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLORS
BY MAYNARD DIXON

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THE DELAFIELD AFFAIR

CHAPTER I

VENGEANCE AVOWED

CURTIS CONRAD turned from superintending repairs on the adobe wall, and walked across the corral to the gate at the opposite side. As he filled his pipe he looked across the wide, greenish-gray New Mexican plateau stretching far to east and south and west. It was dotted here and there with little groups of grazing cattle, and he noted a straggling procession of the creatures, their figures wavering and distorted in the heat haze, coming down from the distant foothills. They were following a trail that cut across the plain in a straight line to the pond across the road from the house, beyond a grove of cottonwood trees.

"Poor devils!" he thought. "They're tramping miles for a drink of water, and tomorrow they'll tramp back again for their breakfast. The Castletons are going to lose big money in dead cattle this Summer, unless

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there 's more rain than there was last. It 's awful to see the poor brutes dropping in their tracks. I 'll begin looking for a job in a wetter country if this Summer does n't bring more rain." He turned his attention to his pipe, sheltering bowl and match in his hollowed hand. "No use, in this wind," he muttered. "What a blast it 's blowing to-day! Well, there 's no sand in it."

The plain stretched away from the ranch-house in low, rolling hills, so evenly sized that it gave the impression of a level surface. Up from one of the little valleys rose a horseman, as if he had sprung suddenly from the depths of the earth. Through the heat that wavered over the plain his horse's legs drew out into long, knobby sticks, and both man and steed became an absurd caricature of the sinewy pony and cowboy rider that presently cantered up to the gate with the mail for which Conrad had been waiting.

"Three cow-brutes are down on the pond trail, just where it crosses the road. One of 'em 's got a calf."

"Are they dead?"

"Mighty nigh — will be by night."

"You and Red Jack go and skin them in the morning." Conrad turned toward the

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house, looking at his letters. His mind still lingered over the calf. "Poor little devil, it ought to have a chance," he was thinking, when his eye caught the name on one of the envelopes. He turned upon the cowboy a gaze suddenly grown preoccupied.

"No, Peters," he said; "the calf won't go with the other cattle while its mother is alive, and I saw that gray wolf skulking along the draw this afternoon. You and Red Jack 'd better go down now and put the cows out of their misery. Skin them and bring the calf into the corral till night, and then put it down by the pond with the other cow-brutes."

His eyes quickly returned to the letter that had attracted his attention. "Tremper & Townsend!" he exclaimed with eager surprise. "Why, they were Delafield's attorneys!" He tore open the envelope with an impatient jerk and the rushing wind almost blew from his fingers the check it contained. As his eye ran quickly down the half-dozen lines of the letter his face lighted with satisfaction and amusement.

The sound of a carriage distracted his attention. It turned in at his house-gate and he hastened forward, a lean, long-legged figure of a man, hat doffed and hand outstretched.

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"How are you, Bancroft? Glad to see you! And Miss Bancroft, too! Of course you're coming in. Thirsty? I'll bet you are! And you know we've got the best water in Silverside County here. How much better your daughter's looking, Aleck! If you keep on like this, Miss Bancroft, you'll soon forget you were ever ill."

"Oh, I've forgotten that already, there's such magic in the winds you have here," the girl replied laughingly as he lifted her to the ground. "They're strong enough to blow the past out of your memory and make you forget even your own name!" Her father suddenly turned away and began to hitch the horses. He sent back a covert glance at her as she stood at Conrad's side, a slender figure, her face still thin from recent illness but aglow with the pink of returning health, the breeze fluttering the short brown curls that clustered over her bare head.

"Oh, my hat, please!" she exclaimed, with sudden remembrance of the head-covering she had left hanging in the carriage top. Curtis took it down for her and looked on with undisguised admiration while she tied it with a big bow of ribbon under her chin. Bancroft came back, explaining that they had

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driven since mid-forenoon from the base of Mangan's Peak, and asking if Conrad did not think they had made pretty good time with their new team of horses. Curtis looked them over critically, praising their good points, and approving heartily when Bancroft told him they had been bought for both riding and driving, for he wanted Lucy, now that she was growing strong again, to become an expert horsewoman.

A big cottonwood tree grew beside the gate, and a little plot of grass, enclosed on three sides by whitewashed adobe walls, made a square of welcome green. Lucy Bancroft exclaimed with delight as they entered the tiny yard, stepping mincingly across the grass with lifted gown, and smiling back at the two men, while fleeting dimples played hide-and-seek in her cheeks.

"I 'm so glad, Mr. Conrad," she laughed, "that you have n't any signs up to 'keep off the grass,' for I simply must walk on it. I never saw anything so lovely as this little lawn and this beautiful big green tree, after our long ride across the plain. It makes me think of that line in the Bible about 'the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.'"

"Yes," replied Curtis as he threw open the

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door. "I never knew until I came to New Mexico how much comfort and pleasure there can be in a few blades of grass. When I come in from a long ride and look at this little checker-board square of turf I feel as if I uncurled a whole yard of wrinkles and squints from around my eyes."

The Socorro Springs ranch-house was a rambling sequence of adobe rooms, so joined one to another that they formed the eastern and part of the northern side of the big square corral. It was low and flat-roofed, and struggling tufts of weeds and grass grew along the top and trailed over the edge, adding their chapter to Nature's endless tale of the unwearied determination of Life to evade and overcome Death. The rooms opened out of one another in a long row, all with outside doors looking toward the east and some with additional doors into the corral. A bare adobe yard sloping eastward was bordered by a trickling stream of water along which grew some willows and cottonwoods. Beyond it spread a golden-green field of young alfalfa, and beyond that the greenish-gray plain stretched to the far horizon. Across the front of the house was a narrow wooden porch, and house and porch, walls and sheds, were

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all a dazzling white that in the vivid sunshine smote the sight like a blow across the eyeballs. In the low, large room in front gayly colored Navajo rugs were spread on the floor, white muslin curtains hung at the windows, and rose-bedecked paper covered the walls and ceiling. Unpainted shelves of pine above a battered, flat-topped desk were filled with books, and the round table in the middle of the room was littered with newspapers, magazines, tobacco pouches, and pipes.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Peters, brought a pitcher of water, and Conrad explained to Lucy that the springs from which the ranch took its appellation, *Los Ojos del Socorro*, "The Springs of Succor," had been so named nearly three hundred years before by a party of Spanish explorers, because they had come unexpectedly upon the pure waters when they were almost dead from thirst. At the housekeeper's suggestion Lucy went into the next room to lie down for a half-hour's rest before they should start for their home in Golden, twenty miles farther westward. The door, accidentally left ajar, swung part way open and she could hear plainly the voices of her father and Conrad as she lay with eyes

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closed and thoughts wandering, scarcely heeding what they said.

The two men were absorbed in a discussion of local politics. "Dan Tillinghurst is all right," said Conrad. "He's made a good sheriff and he ought to have the office again. I shall do all I can to have him renominated and to help elect him afterwards. But Dellmey Baxter for Congress again! That's where I buck, and buck hard, and keep a-buckin'."

"But he's the head of the party in the Territory," objected Bancroft. "He can bring out more votes than any other man we can put up. If we turn him down in the convention they'll beat us at the polls."

"We'll deserve to be beaten if we nominate him, anyway. I can't stomach him any longer, Aleck, and I don't see how you can."

"Oh, you're prejudiced, Curt," said the other, good-naturedly. "You know you can never see any good in a man you dislike, and you took a dislike to Baxter the first day you set foot in the Territory."

"Maybe I am prejudiced; but in Dell Baxter's case there's ample reason to be, and I'd be ashamed of myself if I was n't. I

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know he 's a friend of yours, but that does n't prevent him from being the worst scoundrel in the whole Territory. I tell you, Aleck, there 's nothing that man would n't do, unless it was something square and honest."

"Come, come, Curt, that 's rank exaggeration. I 've been associated with Dell Baxter financially ever since I located in this part of the country, and I 've always found him strictly on the square."

"Then it was because it was to his interest to be square. He 'll do you up yet, if he gets the chance and thinks it worth while. He 's had his finger in every crooked scheme that 's been put through from Raton to El Paso, and his hands are as bloody as his pockets are dirty."

"Don't you think it 's going a little too far," asked Bancroft, smiling calmly, "to accuse a man in that wholesale way when you have n't any basis for your assertions but the merest idle gossip?"

Conrad gave an indignant snort. "Oh, I 'm not saying he 's done the jobs himself. He thinks too much of that fat paunch of his to put that into any danger. But why does he keep those Mexican thugs hanging

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around him if it is n't to use them for things he would n't dare do himself? Why, I heard from Santa Fe only last week that he 's taken into his pay that Mexican cut-throat, Liberato Herrara, whom he saved last Winter from conviction for the Paxton murder."

"No, Aleck," he went on. "I buck when it comes to Dell Baxter for Congress again. If he gets the nomination and the other side puts up Johnny Martinez, as it 's likely they will, I 'm going to support Johnny."

"But he 's a Mexican."

"I don't care what he is as long as he 's a decent man. He won't be a disgrace to the Territory in Washington, and that 's more than you can say of Baxter."

Bancroft's impassive face lighted with a bantering smile. "There 's no limit to your bad opinion of a man, is there, Curt, if he once gets into your disfavor? By the way, is it true that the Castletons are behind Johnny Martinez?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. I 'm their hired man here on the ranch, but my vote 's my own, and so 's what little influence I may have, and I 'll do with both of 'em just what I damn please. And if it came to a

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show-down, I 'd be perfectly willing to lose my job if that would keep Dell Baxter from going back to Congress."

Bancroft laughed again. Conrad's eye, as he turned to his desk for more cigars, fell upon the little pile of letters and papers he had just received. On the top lay the Tremper & Townsend envelope. "By the way, Aleck, you 're from Boston, ain't you?" he exclaimed impulsively.

In the next room, Lucy, listening sleepily to the two voices, had been noting the difference in their quality. Conrad's was high and clear, his speech rapid and incisive. Her father's, lower and more deliberate, had in it a subtle, persuasive quality. "Dear daddy!" she whispered softly, her heart warm with affection. Then the new, sharp edge in Conrad's tone gripped her attention and sent her eyes flying open. Wide awake on the instant, she listened for the sound of her father's voice again. Had she been on the scene, she might have noted that he turned an instant's keen gaze upon his companion before he answered, carelessly enough:

"Yes; originally. But I 've come from so many other places since then that I almost forget it, unless somebody reminds me. I

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have n't been back there, or known much about the old place, for years."

Conrad's boyish smile illuminated his face and twinkled in his blue eyes. "Yes," he said; "'most everybody out here is so everlastingly on the lope that it 's no wonder some of 'em lose their names every once in a while and have to pick up 'most anything that comes handy. I 'm no exception, though I 've not yet forgotten 'what was my name back in the States.' But did you know anything about the Delafield affair in Boston, fifteen or sixteen years ago?"

"I heard of it at the time, but it was after I left the city. It was so long ago that I forget the details. Skipped, did n't he, with a lot of funds? Or was he the one who defaulted and jumped into the Charles River?"

Conrad had an eagerness of speech and manner that in a man of less vigor would have been accounted nervousness. Voice, face, and gesture were alive with it as he responded: "Jump nothing! except to get out of reach of his creditors! He 's alive yet and making money somewhere, and I mean to find him! I 've got a particular interest in that man, and when I come up with him he 'll have a particular interest in me. For I 'm going

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to give him such a song-and-dance as he 's never had before."

Bancroft listened calmly, his face and manner as impassive as usual, but his eyes narrowed as they met his companion's excited gaze. Smiling slightly, he replied, "What has he done to stir you up so? You must have been too young to be interested in financial investments then."

"So I was, directly. Nevertheless, it happens, Aleck, that the Delafield affair has influenced me and my life more than any other one thing. My father lost everything he had in Sumner L. Delafield's smash-up. I was fifteen years old then, and getting ready to go to Michigan University — afterward I was to study law and be a prominent citizen. My father met Delafield first during a business trip to Boston — we lived in central Illinois, and father was well-to-do — and, just like everybody else, he gave the man his entire confidence. You remember, of course, how Delafield came to the top as a regular young Napoleon of business, and soon made a reputation as one of the big financiers. When he turned up missing one fine morning, and it was found that the bottom had dropped out of everything, most people believed he had

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killed himself. But he had n't, I happen to know, and he 's still alive. Well, my father had been so influenced by Delafield — the fellow must have been a persuasive cuss — that he had put everything he could raise into the man's schemes, and had even mortgaged our home. He had a weak heart, and when he read the news of Delafield's default and disappearance he fell out of his chair dead. The sudden shock of it all prostrated my mother, and she died in giving premature birth to a child. So there was I, a fifteen-year-old boy, suddenly dropped to the bottom of poverty, with two younger sisters and a little brother to take care of.

"I tell you, I swore vengeance on that man. I promised myself I 'd hunt him down if it took a lifetime. I 'm on his trail now, and I 'm not going to leave it until I run him into his hole. Then I 'm going to stand him up and call him to his face all he deserves; and give him a gun, so he can have a fair chance for his worthless life, and take one myself; and then I 'll put a bullet through his scoundrel brain if I have to hang for it afterward!"

In the adjoining room Lucy Bancroft, with wide eyes and heightened color, was listening

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to Conrad's story. The thrill of keen-edged purpose in his tense and eager tones had set her nerves to vibrating until her body was a-tremble. At his last sentence Curtis brought his fist down on the table with a crash that almost startled her into outcry. A moment of silence followed, and then she heard her father's cool and even voice, "But suppose he should put one through yours first?"

"Oh, he's welcome to do that if he can draw quicker or shoot straighter than I can. He'll get one through his head before the *baile* is over, and that's all I care about. The round-up's coming, and I reckon he knows it. For to-day I got a letter from Tremper & Townsend of Boston, who settled up his affairs after his disappearance, enclosing a check for five hundred dollars, saying he wished it sent to me as the first instalment of the amount he owed my father, which he hopes, before long, to be able to pay in full."

Bancroft flicked the ash from his cigar with unusual care, looked at it with contemplative interest, and drew a whiff or two before he spoke. Turning to Conrad with a quizzical smile, he said: "Well, Curt, doesn't that rather take the edge off your purpose? Why are you still shaking your gory locks and

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roaring like a wounded bull at him when he 's evidently doing the square thing by you? Why don't you let up on your chase and give him a chance?"

"Not on your life," was Conrad's emphatic rejoinder. "It 's too late in the game for me to take repentance and an honest purpose on the hoof! He 's found out that I 'm getting hot on the scent and he wants to buy me off — that 's all that check means. It 's not the loss of the money that sticks in my craw; it 's the deviltry he worked years ago. Whenever I find that he 's discharging his debts to all his other creditors, who are n't after him hot-foot, then I 'll consent to wait for my parley until he has settled the whole score."

Lucy arose from the bed depressed with a vague sense of trouble. The longing seized her to be out-of-doors again, alone with her father on the wide plain, with the wind smiting her face and filling her lungs and making her forget everything but her own joy in being alive. She rubbed her eyes, smoothed her face, and forced herself to smile at the reflection in the mirror until her agitation was subdued. And presently, smiling and self-possessed, she opened the door into the

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front room, just as her father was finishing some friendly advice to Conrad.

"Well, Curt, it 's your affair," he had said, "and if you are so dead-set on getting that kind of revenge I suppose you 'll go ahead and get it. But you 'd better be careful; if this man is desperate he might try to head you off by the same means. And you could n't exactly blame him for objecting to being shot in his tracks, or for taking measures to keep you from doing it. For my part, I never thought revenge was a paying investment, and I still believe you 're foolish to waste your time, energy, and money in that sort of business.

"Ah, Lucy, is that you?" he went on, as she opened the door. "Come in, dear. Have you had a nap, and do you feel better?"

"Yes, thank you, I 've rested beautifully, and I 'm ready to start whenever you wish," she replied.

Conrad produced a bottle of port wine, telling them as he filled their glasses that it had been sent him by a friend in California in whose cellars it had lain for twenty years, and that it would be a good tonic for Miss Bancroft. The friend had promised to send him more, and with her permission he would

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take a bottle to her the next time he went to Golden.

As they stepped out of the house Lucy looked toward the west, whence the wind came, and as it struck her full in the face she gasped for breath and her slender body swayed in its rushing current. She grasped her wide hat brim with both hands and held it down so that it made a frame for her face. Laughing with joy she turned to Curtis.

"Oh, I love these winds, Mr. Conrad! I know they blow sand into your eyes and pelt your face with gravel, but they make you feel so good! I always want to dance when I 've been out in a wind like this for a minute or two." She took half a dozen dancing steps across the little lawn. "And they are so pure and sweet," she went on more seriously, "and make you feel so — so right that it seems as if they ought to blow all the wickedness out of one's mind."

"Jiminy! I wonder if she heard what I said in there!" thought Conrad with inward panic. But he smiled down at her glowing young face and his eyes shone with admiration as he replied: "That is a beautiful theory, Miss Bancroft, but I 'm afraid it does n't pan out much in practice. It rather seems

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to me that most people who come to New Mexico have that sort of thing blown into them instead of out of them. As for myself," and he grinned broadly, "I can't say that I feel any increase in righteousness, no matter how much I waltz around in these zephyrs."

"And you must have given them a fair trial, too!" she laughed back. "But you may make all the fun you like of my little pet theory, Mr. Conrad. I shall believe in it just the same, and like the country just as much."

"No; she did n't hear, and, besides, she said she 'd been asleep, so it 's all right," thought Curtis with much relief, as he went on eagerly: "I 'm glad you 're pleased with us and our winds, so that you 'll want to stay. I assure you, Miss Bancroft, you can't find such a superior quality of wind anywhere else in the United States."

"Oh, I 'm going to stay, not on account of the wind, but on account of my father, who, I assure you, Mr. Conrad, is the most superior quality of father to be found anywhere in the United States! I 've been away from him so much that now I 'm perfectly happy to be with him all the time. You see, when my dear mother died five years ago,

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father put me in a boarding-school, and afterward sent me to Chicago for a year to study music, and there I had that attack of typhoid fever that came so near to killing me. But I 'm here with him at last, and I mean to stay. And I 'm learning to ride now, Mr. Conrad, and father thinks I 'm getting on very well; don't you, daddy?" She turned to her father, as he came beside them at the carriage wheel, with a fond smile and a touch of her hand upon his arm.

"Oh, yes," he answered, returning her smile and patting her shoulder; "you are doing bravely, Lucy. You 'll soon be scouring the plain like the heroine of a dime novel."

"No New Mexican girl," said Conrad as he helped her into the carriage, "thinks she can really ride until she can rope a steer. If you 're going to be such an enthusiastic New Mexican you 'll have to learn tricks of that sort. Get your father to bring you out here some day, and I 'll give you lessons in cowboy riding."

"Agreed! that would be great fun!" she exclaimed, smiling down at him, her eyes twinkling and the dimples dancing in and out of her cheeks. "We 'll come out, won't we,

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daddy, after Miss Dent comes. I shall remember your promise, Mr. Conrad."

Curtis waved a last good-bye as they turned the corner of his corral, and went back to his desk and his interrupted mail. "A mighty good fellow Aleck Bancroft is," he said in a half-aloud tone. "He does n't palaver a lot, but he makes you feel he 's your friend. I wonder if I said too much about Delafield. That check had wound me up and I sure talked more than I meant to." Long hours of solitude out of doors with only a silent plain around him and a silent sky above are likely to make a man so yearn for the sound of a human voice, though it be only his own, that he falls into the habit of thinking aloud. Conrad had the social temperament and it had not taken the wide and silent spaces of earth and air long to engender in him the habit of making companionship out of his own speech.

He pulled thoughtfully at his sunburned moustache for a moment as he considered the matter. "It might have been just as well if I had n't said so much," he went on aloud, "but he 's close-mouthed and a good friend of mine. No, she did n't hear me — that 's sure. How pretty she is when her eyes twinkle and her dimples come and go! I

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hope that wine will come in time for me to take her a bottle the next time I go to Golden. Well, I can call on her, anyway, and apologize because it has n't. Hello! Here 's a letter from Littleton! Has he got hold of something new about Delafield?"

"I was down in the northern part of your Territory last week on other business," he read, "and I happened to meet a man who is, I think, on the trail of the very same person we 're after, though he 's been working it from the other end. If I 'm right about it, the man we want is now some prominent and respected citizen of New Mexico, and maybe some good friend — or enemy — of yours at this moment. The man I met is Rutherford W. Jenkins, of Las Vegas. You probably know him —"

"Sure! And know him to be a skunk!" Conrad exclaimed with a contemptuous snort.

"I could n't get much out of him," the letter went on, "although I gave him a tip about the trail we 're on and a little of Delafield's history as a bait. He snapped at it, and then began to dissemble his satisfaction, so I 'm sure it is of value to him. But not even firewater would make him give up anything more. However, I feel pretty sure that he either

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knows already who Delafield is or expects soon to find out. I think he 's working at it with an eye to the possibilities of blackmail of one sort or another. Perhaps if you see him yourself you can get something out of him."

Conrad's face glowed with satisfaction as he finished the letter. "The birds won't get a chance to make any nests in my hair this trip! I 'll sashay up the line this very night and I 'll find out who Delafield is from Jenkins, if I have to choke the life out of him to do it. God!" His vengeful desire glowed like a blue flame in his eyes. He jumped to his feet, stretched out his arms, and clenched his fists. "Sumner L. Delafield, it 's getting time for you to say your prayers!"

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CHAPTER II

THE EVIL THAT MEN DO

LUCY BANCROFT and her father were unusually silent as they drove toward home. After an effort to chatter gayly she grew quiet—to her father's surprise, for she was ordinarily a vivacious companion. Speculating uneasily whether or not she had heard Conrad's story, and reassuring himself that it could mean nothing to her in any event, he made several efforts to draw her into speech. But she answered with her mind so evidently intent elsewhere that he gave up the attempt. The fear grew on him that she had overheard the conversation and that it had left an undue impression on her mind.

A mirage of singularly perfect illusion lay across the plain to their left, and he drew her attention to its silvery surface, the trees bordering its unreal banks, the cattle standing knee-deep in its waters, and the steamboat puffing across its breast. Lucy admired

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and wondered for a moment, then turned the other way and looked back at the green tree clusters and white buildings of the ranch they had left. Her gaze lingered there until they crossed the hill, and its summit hid the scene from view.

Bancroft sought to reassure himself. Did she not say she had been asleep? And the door was shut. Surely she could not have heard! Even if she had why should she care about it? Nevertheless, her silence made him anxious. It annoyed him to think that her mind was intent upon Conrad's story. He made another effort to draw her out of her abstraction by asking how soon she expected their friend, Louise Dent, who was coming to spend the Summer with them. Lucy showed interest in this and they discussed plans for her entertainment. But presently she fell silent again, looking straight ahead with a little frown on her brow.

The conviction gripped Bancroft's mind that she had overheard the cattleman's recital of his wrongs. Alarm stirred in his heart as he tried to imagine what impression it had made upon her. Would she sympathize with Conrad? For the moment he forgot everything else — business deals and

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political contests, friendships and enmities, in his desire to know what had been the effect upon the girl beside him of Conrad's outburst. But much as he wished to know, he feared still more the surety of what her feeling might be, and he could not bring himself to ask the questions that would draw her out.

Presently Lucy's voice broke suddenly upon their silence. "I wonder what became of his sisters!" Her color rose as she spoke and she gazed with exaggerated interest at a tall, yellow-flowered cactus beside the road.

"Whose sisters, Lucy?" her father asked carelessly, flicking the horses to a faster pace. But his heart sank as he thought, "She did hear it all!"

"Why, Mr. Conrad's. You know he said he was left when he was only fifteen with two younger sisters and a little brother to take care of."

"Oh — Conrad — I don't know. They are probably married by this time. That was a long time ago. I've heard him mention his sisters before, I think. Yes; I recall now that he has told me they are both married and prosperous somewhere in Illinois or Iowa."

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"And his younger brother?"

"Oh, he's just a young fellow, and Curtis is putting him through college. Conrad banks with me, and I've noticed his checks sometimes when they come back."

"How good he is to them! It must have been very hard on him." Lucy's tone was sympathetic, but her father replied briskly:

"Oh, I don't know! Responsibility is sometimes just the thing to bring out all the good there is in a young fellow and show what sort of stuff he's made of."

"I suppose that's why he's never married," Lucy went on, following her own line of thought, her voice still sounding the sympathetic note, "because he had to take care of the others."

"I don't suppose that's a fault in your eyes, my dear."

"Of course not, daddy!" Lucy flashed back, smiling and dimpling. "Of course a girl likes a young man better because he's more interesting and can pay her more attention. You would yourself, daddy, if you were a girl."

"Very likely, my dear. But I like Curtis Conrad well enough, even if I'm not as young as you are and of your sex. I was

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disappointed in him to-day, though, and surprised as well. You must have heard what he said; how did it strike you to hear a young man boast of his intention to commit murder?"

He spoke so earnestly and the persuasive quality in his voice was so insistent that Lucy turned upon him a quick look of surprise and question. Then her eyes fell as a sudden rush of emotion, coming she knew not whence or why, almost choked her utterance.

"I don't know," she began tremulously, "perhaps he would n't really do it — I don't believe he would — he seems too good and kind to be really wicked or cruel." She stopped a moment, only to break out abruptly:

"And it was such a wicked thing that man Delafield did! Oh, he must have been a villain! As wicked and cruel — oh, as bad as he could be! I can't blame Mr. Conrad for feeling as he does. I know it seems an awful thing for me to say, but I really can't blame him, daddy, when I think what that man made him suffer — and he was only one; there must have been many others. I might even feel the same way if I were in his place and it had been you that was killed!" There

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was a thrill in her voice that seemed in her father's ears to be the echo of that which had vibrated through Curtis Conrad's words when he so passionately declared his purpose. Her words were as knife-thrusts in his heart as she went on, "Oh, how I should hate him! I know I should hate him with all my strength!"

He made no immediate reply, leaning forward to tap the horses with the whip-lash. Lucy choked down a sob or two, turned, threw her arms around his neck, and burst into tears. He put his arm about her with a sudden close pressure, and she, with her eyes hidden against his shoulder, could not see that his face had gone suddenly white and that underneath his brown moustache and pointed beard his lips were pale and tense.

"Well, well, Lucy," he said presently, his voice calm and caressing, "there's no need to be tragic over it. Is it any of our affair, even if Conrad is our good friend? Possibly Delafield was n't as bad as he says — it's likely Curt exaggerates about him — he usually does when he dislikes anybody. And perhaps Delafield suffered as much as — the others. Come, dear, brace up and don't be hysterical."

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Lucy straightened up and gave her father a wavering, wistful smile. "It was silly of me, was n't it, daddy, to act like that! I 'm ashamed of myself. I don't know why I cried — I guess it was because I am tired."

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CHAPTER III

MISTAKE, OR BLUNDER?

WITH eager pleasure Conrad gazed from his car window the next morning at the narrow bright ribbon of verdure with which the Rio Grande pranks itself on its southward course through New Mexico. The unkempt fields, the orchards and meadows, and the softened and caressing sunlight were as balm to his eyes, accustomed to the pale, grim southern plain and its fierce white sunshine. As the train rushed northward along the banks of the muddy stream, he looked at the little adobe houses, wondering how long these peaceful Mexican homes could withstand the pressure of the dominant American. He became aware that the men behind him were discussing the same question.

"It will be only a few years," one of them was saying, "until this rich valley with all this water for irrigation will be in American hands."

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"The greasers are safe enough," said his companion, "until they begin to borrow on mortgages. Then their fate is settled."

"I heard the other day," responded the first, "that Dell Baxter 's been corralling a lot of mortgages on the land hereabouts."

The other chuckled. "You bet. Dell ain't the man to let a little chance like this slip by him. These *paisanos* look on him as a sort of 'little father' and borrow money of him with utter heedlessness of the day of reckoning. He jollies them along and tells 'em they 're good fellows and hard workers, and he 's sure they 'll be able to pay when the time comes. Of course they never pay back a blessed *peso*, and Baxter gets the ranch. I 'll bet it won't be long till he 'll be exploiting a big land improvement company and selling these 'doby farms for ten times what they cost him."

The talk of the two men drifted into politics, and presently Conrad heard them discussing Bancroft's loyal support of Baxter for Congress. "He 's got to do it," said one of them. "Dell 's been loaning him money and taking mortgages until Bancroft could n't do anything else if he wanted to. Dell knows that Bancroft's support is a

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mighty important asset on account of the confidence people have in him, and Dell's been careful to cinch it good and tight."

As Curtis bought an Albuquerque morning paper from the train-boy he thought indignantly, "That's all poppycock! Aleck's got too much grit to let anybody throttle him with a few dirty *pesos*. Hullo! What's this about Jenkins?" His eye had caught the name of the man he wished to see in a column of local news. As he read, "Rutherford W. Jenkins came down from Las Vegas yesterday and is stopping at the Metropolitan," his face shone with satisfaction. "Good luck!" he thought. "We'll be in Albuquerque in half an hour, and I'll go for my man like a steer on the prod!"

At the hotel he found Jenkins, with a number of other men, smoking and talking on the porch. He did not expect to be remembered, for they had met only once, months before. But Jenkins came forward with his hand outstretched in greeting. "How do you do, Mr. Conrad! You don't get up to this part of the Territory very often; but we're always glad to see you."

"Thank you, Mr. Jenkins. I've come this time especially to see you, and as soon as you

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have a moment or two to spare I 'd like a private conversation."

"Certainly! With pleasure! Just excuse me for a minute, will you, till I finish up the business I have with these men, and then we 'll go up to my room."

Conrad waited, tense and expectant, the quite apparent fact that Jenkins was engaged in mere desultory chat and story-telling increasing his irritation at the delay. He had jumped to the conclusion that Jenkins knew who Delafield was, and his breath came short and chokingly at the thought that in a few minutes he, too, would know. To know would be to act. His revolver was in his hip-pocket, and he intended to go straight from the interview to that meeting which for half his years had been the one goal of his thought. He glanced at Jenkins, saying to himself, "He looks like a weasel, and I reckon he is just enough of one to have wormed around and worked this thing out." Jenkins was tall, slender, and slightly stooped, his face long and thin, with its salient features crowded too close together. "I reckon he knows, all right," Conrad's thought went on, "and he 'll tell me if I make the inducement big enough — he 'd do anything for money!"

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Under cover of the conversation Jenkins had been doing his share of rapid thinking, prolonging the talk for that very purpose. He was putting together, with the acumen of a man in whom detective processes are a natural endowment, enough facts to convince him of the reason for Conrad's visit, considering the while just what he should do. He felt sure that he must expect a direct question about Delafield's identity, but he put off decision upon his response until he should hear the inquiry.

"Now, Mr. Conrad, we'll go straight up to my room," he said cordially, laying a familiar hand upon the other's shoulder. Curtis shrank back a little, falling behind with a promptitude that left no doubt of his intention to keep the interview entirely formal. Jenkins licked his lips with an unwholesome smile, and led the way in silence. As the door closed behind them, Conrad became aware of an increase of repugnance toward this man so great that the necessity of dealing with him was an irritation.

"Well, Mr. Conrad," said Jenkins, cheerfully, giving the other no time to state his mission, "I hear you are putting in some good licks for Johnny Martinez down in

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Silverside. What do you think of his chances down there? Pretty good, are n't they?"

"Yes, I think so," Curtis replied curtly; and plunged into his own affair. "I have understood, Mr. Jenkins, from my friend Mr. Littleton, of Chicago, whom you met last week, that you are interested in a matter of prime importance to me, and that you have some information I want to get hold of."

"Oh, yes; I remember meeting Littleton last week," Jenkins broke in. "A good fellow, too. So he 's a friend of yours, is he? Yes; he and I scraped up quite a friendship and had a good time together. But say, Conrad, the amount of throat varnish that man can stand is something amazing!"

Curtis straightened himself in his chair impatiently. "He wrote me that he had some conversation with you about Sumner L. Delafield, formerly of Boston, but now, I have reason to believe, living here in New Mexico under an assumed name."

"Yes; I believe we did have a little talk about Delafield," Jenkins interrupted again. "But I 'll have to confess," he went on jocularly, "that my mental condition was n't perfectly clear and it 's likely my remarks were a little foggy too. But I recall that we did

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have some conversation about the Delafield affair. Littleton had some personal interest in Delafield's failure, did n't he?"

"No; all the work he has done on the case has been for me. I have considerable interest in it."

"Have you, indeed? Now, this is a coincidence! For some time past I 've been a good deal interested in that matter myself. I suppose you were roped into some of his schemes?"

For a moment Curtis took counsel with himself upon what and how much he should say, only to thrust back his repulsion against saying anything at all to this man and plunge frankly into his narrative. With the utmost brevity he told of his father's ruin and of his own trailing of the culprit through so many years. Of his motives he said nothing, and of his work in tracking Delafield no more than was necessary. Few, even of his best friends, knew anything about the secret scheme of vengeance he had nursed from boyhood. Even Littleton, the detective who had aided him in the quest, did not know that he wanted to face Delafield for any reason other than to demand restitution.

Having briefly outlined his story, Conrad

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went on to say that Littleton had led him to think that Jenkins must be engaged in the same search, and suggested that an exchange of their discoveries might be for their mutual benefit.

Jenkins listened with evident interest, asking questions here and there concerning certain points in the other's long chase of the fugitive. "Yes; you 've done very well, Conrad," he said, admiration in his voice, "very well indeed. That was a damned crooked trail and you 've done a fine piece of work in following it through."

Curtis gnawed his moustache and frowned. Jenkins's evasive speeches were increasing his irritation and repugnance almost beyond his control. "The amount of the matter is," he burst out, "I 've got the notion that you know who Delafield is, and I 'm willing to pay you for the information. I shall undoubtedly be able to find out for myself if I keep at it a little longer, but it happens that I want to know at once. If you know positively who he is, I am willing to pay you three hundred dollars for the knowledge."

Jenkins walked to the window and stood there silently. He was weighing one thing against another, and deciding whether he

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should tell the whole truth, a part of it, or none at all. Presently he said to himself that a bird in the hand to-day is worth a whole flock that may be in the bush to-morrow.

"Before I decide about your offer, Mr. Conrad," he began cautiously, "there are two or three things I would like to know. You are doing some good work for Martinez for Congress, I understand."

"The best I can," answered Curtis with surprise.

"Well, as you know, I am warmly in his favor myself. I want to get him the support of as many leading men in the Territory as possible. This man Delafield is one of Baxter's influential lieutenants, and I particularly want to win him over to Martinez. You, I happen to know, have some influence with him."

A nervous start betrayed the strain Conrad was under, and an eager look lighted his face. Jenkins saw it, smiled blandly, and inwardly decided to demand another hundred dollars. "It has occurred to me," he went on, "that you might be able to influence him when I could n't. Combine this leverage with your friendship, and I believe almost anything is possible. If I let you have this

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information will you agree to use it and your influence in such a way as to induce him to join in with Johnny Martinez?"

The look that blazed in Conrad's eyes, coupled with the same involuntary shrinking movement that he had made in escaping Jenkins's hand at the foot of the stairway, showed the rapid ebbing of his self-control. Jenkins noticed both look and movement, and a gleam of angry resentment flashed into his dark eyes. But it was quickly repressed, as he suavely asked, "Well, what do you say?"

"I don't know that I can promise," said Curtis, stiffly, "that my influence would count as much as that. Possibly it will be enough to keep him from supporting Dellmey Baxter. Yes," he went on with a grim look, "I think I can assure you he will be neutral through the rest of this campaign."

"That might perhaps be satisfactory," said Jenkins meditatively, inwardly deciding to raise the price another hundred dollars in lieu of the aid for Martinez. "But if that is all you 're sure of doing I shall have to ask more money for the information. It has cost me a great deal of time and effort, and if I can't bring about this result with it I must repay myself some other way. I will tell you what

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you want to know, Mr. Conrad, if you will give me five hundred dollars and your promise to do your best to get him to support Martinez."

"That is what I said I could not do; and you are asking more money because I could not promise it."

"Well, then, if you will promise to induce him to remain neutral during this campaign."

"Yes; I will promise that, and I will give you the five hundred dollars."

"Very well; it's a bargain."

Curtis wrote his check for that sum on the First National Bank of Golden. Jenkins examined the bit of paper, folded it away in his pocket-book, rubbed his hands, and smiled at Conrad.

"You will be surprised," he said, "when you hear the man's name. He is well known to you, and he is universally regarded, all over New Mexico, as a model citizen, as square and honest as any man in the Territory — and much more so than most of them."

"Yes?" said Conrad, rising and reaching for his hat.

"Yes, you will be astonished, I promise you," Jenkins went on, rising and facing

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Curtis, still smiling and rubbing his hands together in satisfaction. "For Sumner L. Delafield, the fugitive from justice," — he began speaking slowly and impressively, — "the absconding defaulter, the man who sank the fortunes of hundreds of people, the man who had to hide in Canada and slink around in out-of-the-way places for so many years, is now known as" — there was a brief pause to give his revelation its fullest dramatic effect — "is now known in New Mexico as Alexander Bancroft, president of the bank on which your check is drawn."

Conrad started, and his attitude of eager attention stiffened. For an instant half a dozen Jenkinses seemed to be whirling about the room. Out of the repugnance, contempt, and anger boiling in his veins shot a definite idea, — the desire to choke the man who had said this thing about his best friend. He leaped forward, seized Jenkins by the collar, and shook him as if he had been a ten-year-old boy. Although his arms were flying hither and yon Jenkins grabbed wildly for the pistol in his pocket. Curtis saw the movement, and with his left hand seized the butt. As he pulled it out Jenkins caught its barrel; but with a twist of his right arm and a jerk with

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his left Conrad wrested the gun from the other's hand and threw it under the bed.

His face white and his eyes blazing, he grasped Jenkins by the shoulders and jammed him against the wall until the windows rattled. With two quick, backward strides he gained the door. Opening it with a hand stretched behind him, Curtis spoke with deliberate emphasis, pointing his words with a menacing forefinger:

"Rutherford Jenkins, you are the damnedest liar and vilest skunk that ever made tracks in New Mexico, and if you ever tell that lie about Bancroft to another living soul I'll wring your neck!"

Jenkins sprang toward the door, but as it closed from without he stooped, shook himself together, and swore under his breath. He took out the check, and chuckled. "I'll get it cashed before he changes his mind," he thought. Then a wave of anger and resentment rolled over him and he shook an impotent fist at the closed door. "Damn him!" he said aloud, "I'll get even with him yet."

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CHAPTER IV.

THE POWERS CONFER

LUCY BANCROFT bade a smiling good-bye to her father at the door of the First National Bank, and crossed the street to a store on the corner opposite. Lingering in the doorway for her turn to be waited upon, she watched him with admiring eyes. "What a handsome man daddy is," she was thinking; "I like a man to be tall and straight and broad-shouldered; and I 'm glad he 's always so well groomed; I 'd love him just as much if he was n't, but I could n't be quite so proud of him."

Another man was coming up the street toward her father, and Lucy smiled as her eyes fell upon him. "There 's Congressman Baxter," her thought ran on. "How slouchy and dumpy he seems beside daddy! They say he 's one of the smartest men in the Territory; but I 'm sure daddy is just as smart as he is, and he 's certainly a great deal

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handsomer and nicer looking. And he 's just as nice as he looks, too, my dear daddy!"

Bancroft appeared the man of substance and of consequence, confident alike in himself and in the regard of the community, as he stood in the door of his bank and met the Congressman with friendly greeting. "Glad to see you, Baxter! Come in! I want to have a talk with you."

Dellmey Baxter shook hands cordially, pleasure at the meeting fairly radiating from his round, sunburned face, even his cold gray eyes borrowing warmth from his gratified and shining countenance. One of these eyes was set at an angle slightly oblique, its peculiarity made more prominent by the loose hanging of the upper lid from the outer corner. The expression of cunning thus given to the upper part of his face was curiously at variance with his jovial look and manner.

In Bancroft's private office Baxter's first question was if the other had yet visited the mine at the base of Mangan's Peak, concerning which they had had correspondence.

"Yes; I was there this week. The man who owns it has n't *sabe* enough about mines to know what a good proposition he 's got. He 'll sell cheap for cash, for he needs the

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money. I think it's a first-class investment, and we'd better snap it up. Shall we make it half and half?"

"I don't know about going in as a partner, Aleck. I'm getting too much tied up in all kinds of enterprises, and I don't want to have more on my hands than I can attend to. But if it's a good thing I'd like to help you get hold of it; I know you'd hustle its development and make all there is in it tell for the reputation of New Mexico. I've got too many other things on hand to go in as a partner, but if you haven't the ready cash to buy it yourself I'll advance you what you need and take a mortgage on the property."

In the persuasive tones of Bancroft's reply there was no hint of the reluctance and disappointment he inwardly felt at this prospect of having to increase his indebtedness to Baxter, concerning which he already felt some anxiety.

"That hardly seems fair, Dell. You gave me the hint about the mine, and you ought to make more than that out of it. I'm satisfied it's an almighty good proposition and can be made to pay for itself and for the money needed in initial development inside the first year."

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"Oh, that's all right," Baxter responded heartily. "I'm glad to let the chance come your way, because you've got more *sabe* and more hustle than any other man I know, and you'll do something worth while with it. Think about it, and we'll talk it over again before I go back. I'm down here now mainly for politics. You know Silverside County as well as any man in it — how do things look?"

"Well, it's always a close county, you know. But you'll probably get the delegates to the convention, and I reckon you'll stand as good a chance on election day as Johnny Martinez."

The other chuckled. "Well, I rather guess! Why, he's got no money to put into the fight!"

"No; but there are the Castletons."

"I heard that their superintendent at Socorro Springs ranch — what's his name? — Conrad? — had come out strong in his favor. What do they care about it? Neither one of 'em spends two weeks out of the year in the Territory."

"Oh, if they really have any interest in it I suppose it's that everlasting 'cousin' business of the Mexicans. You know Ned

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Castleton married a first cousin of Johnny's, although she 's half American."

Baxter looked thoughtful. "If he 's got the Castleton money back of him," he began doubtfully, but broke off with an opposing idea: "I 've heard that the wives of the two brothers fight each other to the limit on every proposition that comes along, and I reckon if Turner's wife found out that Ned's wife wanted Martinez boosted into Congress she 'd see to it that Turner blocked the game if he could."

"If Ned Castleton should back up Martinez with a bagful or two of his loose cash it would make mighty hard sledding for us," observed Bancroft.

Baxter pursed his lips and whistled softly. "I reckon it would!" he said, with an air of taking the other into his innermost counsels. Then he broke out warmly: "That was damn good of you, Aleck, to come out for me as squarely as you did in the Albuquerque *Leader* the other day! It 's a good thing for me, all over the Territory, to have people know that Alexander Bancroft is supporting me. They 've got confidence in you, Aleck. I appreciate it, I tell you, and I won't forget it, either."

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Baxter had already served two terms in Congress, and some members of his party thought he should be willing to stand aside and give some one else the prize. This made him anxious about the outcome of the approaching convention, and set him to interrogating the banker regarding the intentions of this, that, and the other man of local consequence. At last he came back to the subject of the Castletons.

"Do you really think, Aleck, that Ned Castleton's money is behind Martinez? If it is, that would explain Conrad's attitude."

Bancroft saw that the Congressman was worried by the possibility of such effective opposition. On the instant an idea was projected into his mind, born of his own secret anxiety and his knowledge of Baxter's reputation. It came so suddenly and so vividly that it took him unawares, sending a telltale light into his eyes and across his usually impassive countenance. His lids were quickly lowered, but Baxter had already seen the revealing flash and was wondering what it might mean. The banker hesitated for a moment, his thoughts confused by the force of the bolt which had shot into his mind.

"Of course I don't know anything about

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it," he went on cautiously, the other watching him for signs of self-betrayal, "but it looks to me as if Conrad might be acting as Ned Castleton's agent, so that Ned won't have to be mixed up in it. That would take away the chance of Mrs. Turner's trying to make her husband block the game. And Conrad is violently opposed to you. He handles you without gloves, and is doing all he can against your nomination. He says he 'll bolt you if you get it, and that if the other side puts up Martinez he 'll jump in and fight for him with both feet and his spurs on."

The smile faded from Baxter's face, and his left eyelid drooped lower than usual — a sign that his mind was busy with some knotty problem. But he was not considering the pros and cons of the Castleton money. He was wondering why that sudden purpose had flashed in Bancroft's eyes, why he had shown that momentary discomposure, and why he was now dwelling so much more strongly on the fact of Conrad's opposition. He drew his chair nearer and in confidential tones began to inquire about the young cattleman: "Has Conrad got much influence?"

"Yes; a good deal. He 's a bright, energetic fellow, and he 's made lots of friends."

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"Know anything about him, Aleck?"

"Not much. Ned Castleton ran across him in San Francisco, I believe, where he was agent for one of the big cattle ranches in southern California. He 's been their superintendent at Socorro Springs for two years, and he 's put the ranch in better shape and made it pay better, in spite of the drought, than anybody else they 've had since their father died."

"But where 'd he come from before Castleton got him?"

"I don't know, except in a general way. I guess he 's mostly run along with the cattle business in Colorado and California and New Mexico."

"You really think his opposition to me down here is important?"

"There 's no doubt about it, Dell," Bancroft rejoined, his manner becoming more earnest and his tones more persuasive as he went on. "Curt Conrad is a fighter from the word 'go,' and he seems to have started out with the intention of doing you up. He 'll sure do you a lot of damage if you can't find some way of making him change his mind. He 's popular, — the sort that everybody likes, you know, — and he 's always enthusiastic and

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cocksure, so that he has a good deal of influence of his own, whether or not he's acting for Ned Castleton. And as people generally believe he is it amounts to the same thing."

"We must get at him some way," said Baxter earnestly, his cold eyes watchful of his companion's manner and expression. "Has n't he done something that would give us a hold on him?"

"No, there's nothing in that lead. I've tried argument, and you might as well talk to a cyclone."

"How about money?"

Bancroft shook his head decisively. "That would be the worst mistake you could make. He would n't touch it and he'd roar about it everywhere. The fact is, Dell, we'll have to get rid of his opposition some way. I've done everything I can, and now I'll have to put it up to you."

"Well, I'll think it over," said Baxter, rising and looking at his watch. "I'll see you again about that mine business, while I'm here, and I want to talk with you about a *paisano* ranch, up above Socorro, there's a chance of our getting. I think we'll be able to get our development company going

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in less than a year. When it's organized, Aleck, I want you to be president of it."

"I don't know about that," Bancroft replied slowly, an uneasy recollection of some of Lucy's freely expressed ideas coming into his mind. "I may prefer to stay in the background, as a silent partner, as our arrangement is now."

"It would be good for the company to have you at its head; your reputation would be an asset," Baxter objected persuasively.

"By the way, Dell, did you foreclose on a man named Melgares, José Maria Melgares, a month or two ago?"

"Melgares? Yes; and I was especially easy on him; let him have three months' extra time. But I had to come down on him finally. Why?"

"He's here in Golden now, and he's been roaring about it. He came down here from the Mogollons, where it's likely he'd been doing some horse-stealing. And I guess he's been lifting chickens and things out of people's back-yards since he's been here."

"Next thing he'll be getting arrested," Baxter chuckled, "and I'll have to defend him — for nothing. These greasers all seem to think I'm a heaven-sent protector for 'em

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all, no matter what they do. So long, Aleck; I 'll see you again before I leave town."

Baxter lounged down the street, greeting one acquaintance after another with a jovial laugh, a hearty handshake, or a slap on the shoulder, his round, red face aglow with good fellowship. But his gray eyes were cold and preoccupied. At the court-house door he stopped to talk with Dan Tillinghurst, the sheriff, and Little Jack Wilder, his deputy.

"Say, Jack," said the sheriff, as the Congressman went on up the street, "what sort o' hell do you-all reckon Dell Baxter 's cookin' up now? He 's too jolly not to have somethin' on hand. The louder he laughs the more sulphur you can bet he 's got in his pockets."

"Be careful, Dan," warned Jack, "or that nomination for sheriff will miss fire."

"Don't you worry about that — Dell an' me 's all right; you-all just worry about the fellow that 's made his eyes look like a dead fish's. Dell 's sure got somethin' on his mind."

There was something on Baxter's mind. He was still wondering why Alexander Bancroft had insisted so strongly upon the importance of young Conrad's opposition, which the Congressman did not believe was of much

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consequence. He chuckled and his left lid drooped lower as he finally decided: "I reckon he wants me to pull some chestnut or other out of the fire for him. I 'll just let him think I 'm taking it all in. I 'd like to know what it is, though, for if I don't keep a good hold on Aleck he 's likely to get heady and try to step into my shoes."

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CHAPTER V

CHASTISEMENT CONDIGN

DAN TILLINGHURST and Little Jack Wilder sat under the big cottonwood in front of the court-house, commenting upon things in general, and, presently, more particularly upon Curtis Conrad and his mare, Brown Betty, when they espied him talking with the landlord in front of the hotel across the stream. The town of Golden lay in a gulch among the foot-hills. It had been a thriving silver camp in the older days. Discovered in the heyday of the pale metal, it had yielded so richly that the men flocking thither, in sheer, exultant contempt of the value of its yellow brother, had named the camp "Golden Gulch." The mines had been in the bottom of the gulch, and near them, along the banks of the stream, had been built all the houses of the mining days. The earliest roads had run along each side of the water, and these were still the main streets of the town. Facing one another across

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the two streets and the bed of the creek were all the public buildings and business houses, the two hotels, some of the best residences, and many of the poorer ones. The Mexican quarter, called "Doby Town" by the Americans, straggled along these thoroughfares and up the hillsides just beyond the heart of the town. Down their entire length cottonwoods of notable girth and majesty spread their branches.

One of the largest and finest of these trees shaded the court-house corner where the Sheriff and his deputy were sprawling their legs and waiting for something to happen. The Sheriff was burly and broad-shouldered, although his legs had not quite been able to keep pace with the growing massiveness of his torso. The occasions were rare when his blue eyes were not twinkling with good humor, while his mouth beneath its absurd little moustache curved in a smile as habitual as his cheerful kindliness and universal optimism. Little Jack Wilder, who owed his descriptive title to his six feet three of height, was slender and lithe. He wasted neither words in talk nor bullets in pistol fights, and he had the reputation of being one of the best shots in the Southwest, as good even as

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Emerson Mead, over at Las Plumas in the adjoining county.

Curtis Conrad walked across the bridge that spanned the stream, Brown Betty at his heels, and met their "Hello, Curt!" with "Hello! Anything new?"

"Yes," said Wilder, "anyway, there's likely to be."

"What sort?"

"That's what we'd like to know," said Tillinghurst. "Jack's been sashaying around Doby Town for the last two days with his eye on a Mexican horse thief, waitin' for him to do something he can be arrested for; and the darn' fool won't do a thing! He just sits around respectable and behaves himself. Jack's gettin' all out of patience with him."

Little Jack growled a corroborative oath, and took a chew of tobacco.

"Well, if you know he's a horse thief, why don't you arrest him?" asked Conrad.

"We know it all right," said Jack; "but he ain't lifted no critters yet in this county. He's been doin' some chicken-thieving and that sort o' thing around town the last week, but we ain't goin' to arrest him for that."

Wilder shut his jaws with a determined snap, while Tillinghurst went on to explain

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in answer to Conrad's look of surprise: "If we arrest him for that he'd be taken before a justice of the peace; and you-all know what kind of a mess Diego Vigil would make of it. He'd likely fine the man whose chicken-coop had been raided because he did n't have more stuff in his back-yard to be stolen, and he'd discharge José Maria Melgares with a warning not to wake people up o' nights by letting the chickens squawk!"

The Sheriff's smile broadened and ran down his throat in a chuckle. Little Jack Wilder burst explosively into brief and profane speech that showed his opinion of Mexicans, and especially of Mexican justices of the peace, to be most contemptuous.

"Then why do you give them the office?" Curtis demanded. "Both parties do it, all over the Territory, though you all know that every time they get a chance they make justice look like a bobtailed horse. Up north last week one of 'em fined a man five dollars for committing murder and warned him not to do it again or he'd have to make it ten next time. You folks all knew what you might expect from Vigil when you gave him the place."

"Oh, well, Curt, you-all ain't run for office

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yet. When you do, you 'll appreciate the fact that the greasers have got to be put where they 'll do the most good. I 'm willin' to give 'em that much, and I 'm only too thankful old Vigil and his friends don't strike for the Sheriff's place."

Tillinghurst chuckled, while Wilder smiled grimly and profanely reckoned he would n't serve under Vigil or any other Mexican. "Mebbe that pock-marked Melgares has been up to some mischief by this time," he added. "I hain't set eyes on him for nigh two hours. Let 's go down to the Blue Front, have a drink, and find out if anything 's happened."

They went down the street together, Brown Betty following with the bridle over her neck. A block farther down stream, a good-looking Mexican came out of the First National Bank and passed them. The Sheriff turned a second keen glance upon him. "That looks like Liberato Herrara," he said to his deputy in a hasty aside. Raising his voice he accosted the man in Spanish.

The Mexican turned and replied in precise English with grave courtesy, "Did the señor speak to me?"

"Yes; ain't you Liberato Herrara?"

"No, señor. My name is José Gonzalez."

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The Sheriff apologized, and the other bowed politely, fell behind, and crossed to the other side of the stream. Conrad asked Tillinghurst if he did not believe Herrara guilty of the murder of which he had been acquitted several months before.

"Of course he was. And it 's likely that ain't the only one either. I 'm glad this man ain't him. If he was down here it would be on some business for Baxter, and it would n't do for me to find out too much about it."

Conrad snorted contemptuously, and Wilder said, "Dan, you 're talkin' too damn much."

"Oh, Curt 's all right," replied the Sheriff, placidly. "He could n't hate Baxter any more than he does if he tried, but he don't go back on his friends. This man Melgares," he went on, "that we 're hopin' will make up his mind to do somethin' worth while, tells a queer yarn. He says he used to have a good ranch in the Rio Grande valley, between Socorro and Albuquerque, but he borrowed money on it from Baxter. Of course he could n't pay; Dell foreclosed, and Melgares had to get out."

"Yes; I heard the other day about Baxter's operations up there," Conrad broke in hotly. "I understand he 's got hold of a lot

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of land in just that way. It 's a cursed, low-down, dirty piece of business."

"Oh, well, better men than Baxter have done the same sort of thing," the Sheriff responded. "From all I can find out about Melgares I reckon he was honest enough up to that time; but he 's been goin' it pretty lively ever since. I think he 's aimin' to work down to the border, where he can do the criss-cross act."

Conrad turned with an exclamation of sudden remembrance. "By the way! Bill Williams told me just now that Rutherford Jenkins is here, at his hotel. Have you seen him? Do you know what he 's here for?"

"I have n't talked with him, but I reckon he 's here on some deal for Johnny Martinez."

Curtis tied the mare to the hitching-post on the corner. "I 've heard," he said cautiously, "that he has a venomous tongue and uses it recklessly. Do you know whether he 's been doing any outrageous talking lately?"

"Well, I reckon nobody would believe anything Jenkins said, anyway. But I have n't heard anything. Have you, Jack?"

Some other men came along, and they all stopped to talk together. Curtis leaned against the mare and stroked her glossy

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neck. She poked her nose into his coat pocket and found a lump of sugar, which she ate with much dainty tossing of her head. It was some minutes before they entered the saloon.

The "Blue Front" was a two-roomed shanty on the edge of the Mexican quarter. Gambling games of various sorts occupied the back room; and there, too, political deals were arranged and votes bargained and paid for between the American politicians and the leaders of the Mexicans. When Conrad and his friends came down the street a number of men were in the rear room, some talking and others busy at cards. At a table near a side window men of both races were engaged in a poker game. One of the players, a pock-marked Mexican with a defective eye, frequently glanced down the street. When he saw the Sheriff and his two companions approach, he rose and watched them. The others wanted to know what he was looking at, and he asked who was the man with the brown mare. A tall, dark American, with slightly stooping shoulders, looked up with interest as he heard them give Conrad's name, and joined the group at the window. Several of the men spoke with enthusiasm about

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Brown Betty, and one, who said he had once worked at Socorro Springs ranch, told them that Conrad thought more of her than of anything else he owned. When the men in front entered the saloon, the pock-marked Mexican cashed in his chips and slipped out through the rear door.

The sound of Conrad's voice in the barroom caught the attention of the tall, dark American. An angry flush reddened his face, his beady eyes snapped, and the tip of his tongue licked his lips. Then something amusing seemed to occur to him, for his features relaxed into a smile and he glanced briskly around the room.

"See if you can find Melgares, will you?" he asked the Mexican with whom he had been talking. "Tell him I 'll wait for him outside the back door."

He stepped out into the bright sunshine, smiling and rubbing his hands together. Back of the shanty was a high adobe wall surrounding the corral of the Mexican houses fronting on the next street. A wooden door in the wall opened cautiously, and the pock-marked face looked out.

"You sent for me, Señor Jenkins?" the Mexican asked.

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"Yes. It's all right. You need n't be afraid. I want you to do something, Melgares."

They stepped inside the corral and Melgares bolted the door. "You saw Conrad's mare just now?" Jenkins began. "Fine creature, is n't she?"

"Splendid, señor. The finest I have seen in a long time."

"I'll warrant it! I never saw a better myself. Looks like a good traveller, does n't she?"

"Si, señor."

"And a stayer, too, I guess! It would n't be hard to get to the Mexican border on her back, would it?"

Melgares grinned, then shook his head. "But my family — I could not take them with me."

"Well — see here, Melgares. Here's fifty dollars. If you'll get away with Conrad's mare you can have it for your trouble. It will take your family down there all right."

"But you, señor, — where do you come in?" He looked suspiciously at Jenkins.

"Oh, never mind me. Conrad did me a bad turn a while ago, and I'm evening up the score. That's all I want out of it."

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"But now, señor?"

"Yes; now's your chance. He's in the saloon, and the mare's tied at the corner."

"The Sheriff is in there, too. The risk is great."

"Well, I'll go in and keep them busy. I'll raise excitement enough inside so that nobody will even look out of the windows. Get out there in five minutes, be quick about it, and ride off down the valley road."

"Give me the money, señor. I'll take the chance."

Jenkins returned, and entered the bar-room with his former companion without attracting the attention of Conrad and his friends. The other spoke of the report about the Castleton money and mentioned Curtis Conrad's name. Jenkins raised his voice in angry reply:

"Oh, damn Conrad! Martinez don't want his help!"

Curtis heard the words and turned sharply around, his face flushing. Jenkins appeared not to see him, and went on:

"The Castletons are all right, but Conrad's help would be a disgrace to any party. Martinez don't want it!" His voice rang loud and

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shrill above the silence that had fallen suddenly upon the room.

Curtis's face paled, even under its ruddy tan, and his eyes blazed. With head up he strode forward. "Jenkins," he said, without raising his voice, although it shook with a warning tremor, "I advise you to be careful. You may have your opinion about me, as I have mine about you — and you know what that is. But don't you say that again, nor anything else of the sort!"

Jenkins turned toward him with an ugly sneer. Recollection of former indignities at Conrad's tongue and hands blazed up in his heart and carried him farther than he had meant to go. With an oath and a vile name he flung his glass in Conrad's face. In an instant the young man's arms were around his body. The others crowded in and tried to stop the quarrel.

"Let us alone!" shouted Curtis, pushing his way toward the back room. "Wilder, take his gun, will you? Get mine out of my pocket, too. This won't be a gun play."

Tillinghurst took Conrad's pistol, and Wilder succeeded in getting Jenkins's revolver, at the cost of a kick on the shin, which

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he repaid in kind. With Jenkins almost helpless in his grasp, Curtis struggled into the rear room. The others were all crowding after him. He turned back a face still pale and set with anger, although a twinkle of amusement was creeping into his eyes.

"Dan," he called, "shut that door and keep out the crowd!"

Instantly there were cries of disapproval.

"Fair play!" "You 're bigger than him!" "We want to see it 's on the square!"

Curtis scowled. "If any of you think it won't be on the square, just wait for me till I get through with him," he shouted.

The Sheriff slammed the door, and set his bulk against it, saying with smiling cheerfulness: "Well, gentlemen, I reckon Mr. Jenkins won't get any more than is comin' to him, and as Sheriff I call on all of you to keep the peace and not interfere."

Alone in the back room with his prisoner, Conrad dropped into a chair, dragged the other over his knees, face downward, then threw out one sinewy leg and caught under it Jenkins's two unruly limbs. Still keeping a firm grip with his left arm, he raised his right hand.

"Now," he said grimly, "you 're going to

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get the sort of spanking your mother did n't give you enough of."

One after another the resounding smacks came down, while Jenkins, his strength spent in futile struggle, could do nothing but writhe helplessly under the smarting blows. The sound of them penetrated to the front room. As the men there realized what was happening they broke into laughter so uproarious that it smote upon Jenkins's ears and forced a hysterical shriek from between his gritted teeth. In Conrad's heart it inspired compassion and he desisted.

"I guess that 'll do for this time," he said, releasing his hold and standing the culprit on his feet. "I don't want to have to hurt you, but let me tell you, you damned skunk," and he seized Jenkins's shoulders and gave him a vigorous shake, "if you ever dare talk about me again in that way, or tell another human being what you told me about Bancroft, I 'll make you wish you 'd never been born."

With a parting shake he let Jenkins fall back into the chair, sobbing aloud. Then he stalked to the door, not even doing his enemy the slight honor of going out backward.

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CHAPTER VI

A STERN CHASE

AS the shout which greeted Conrad's entrance died away the Sheriff called out, "Now, gentlemen, you must all have one with me," and every one lined up at the bar. A rollicking din of chaff and laughter filled the room, and no one except Little Jack Wilder noticed the entrance of a Mexican at the street door. He heard the step, turned quickly, and recognized the man who had told Tillinghurst that he was not Liberato Herrara. Glancing along the line of backs at the bar, the Mexican singled out Conrad and touched his arm.

"I beg your pardon, señor, but did you send some one to ride your mare?"

"To ride my mare? No; what do you mean?"

Before he could answer Wilder sprang forward demanding, "Is she gone?" and Conrad started for the door.

"A man has just ridden her away on the

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run," the Mexican said excitedly, and every one in the room rushed for the street.

"She 's gone!" shouted Conrad.

"Did you see him? What was he like?" demanded the Sheriff.

"A pock-marked greaser with a bad eye?" yelled Wilder, towering threateningly above the bearer of the news.

Gonzalez threw back his head, folded his arms across his breast, and answered deliberately, "He was a Mexican, señor, he was pock-marked, and he was blind in one eye."

"Melgares! He 's done it at last! Hooray!" shouted Wilder.

Far down the street, beyond the last cottonwood, against the gray, sunflooded road, they could see a dark object, distorted by the heat haze, but still showing the form of a man on a galloping horse.

Tillinghurst's smile became an eager grin as he started up the street on a run. "Everybody come that wants to," he called over his shoulder. Wilder and Conrad were already half a block ahead of him, and several others quickly followed.

When they presently came pelting back, their horses at top speed, a crowd of men still stood on the sidewalk, where the Blue

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Front made a splash of brilliant color against the sombre grays and browns of the surrounding adobes. Wilder's tall, thin figure was in the lead, bending forward in the saddle like a sapling in a gale, the wide, limp brim of his sombrero flapping in the wind. Conrad and Tillinghurst were pressing him close, and half a dozen others were pounding along behind these three, while a stout man, who rode awkwardly, trailed along in the rear.

The crowd at the Blue Front shouted encouragingly as they clattered past, and made bets on the chances of catching the fugitive. The Mexican, Gonzalez, watched Conrad closely as he sped by, and said carelessly to the man beside him, "Señor Conrad is a good rider, the best of them all. I hope he will get back his fine mare."

The horsemen swept down the street past the last straggling houses, and out into the open plain. Fleeing down the road, perhaps two miles ahead of them, galloped the Mexican. Tillinghurst measured the distance with a careful eye, and said to Conrad, "He's our meat. We can get him easy." He glanced backward, chuckled, then turned in his saddle, and called loudly, "Come along there, Pendy! Don't get discouraged!"

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Another of the party turned his head and yelled, "You 're all right, Pendy! You 'll get there before Dan does!"

The stout man who brought up the rear had made sure of his gray slouch hat by tying it on with a red bandanna handkerchief. He was gripping his bridle with both hands and bouncing in his saddle like a bag of meal. "Don't you worry about me!" he yelled back good-naturedly; "you can't lose me if you try."

"Who is he?" asked Curtis.

"Pendy? Oh, he 's a tenderfoot. Blew in from the East two or three weeks ago. Somethin' wrong with his bellows — or likely to be, though you-all would n't think it, considerin' his fat. He 's grit clear through, though! Just look at the way he rides!"

Conrad glanced back, laughed, and replied, "Oh, it 'll be good for his liver!" Then he went on seriously, "Dan, do you think there 's any truth in the story that this man Melgares began horse-stealing because Dell Baxter did him out of his ranch?"

"Oh, I don't know! Baxter got his ranch all right, but the greaser did n't have to go to stealin' horses on that account. Chickens are safer; and *chilis* don't even squawk. I

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reckon likely he steals horses because he 'd ruther."

"Well, anyway, Dan, all I want out of this is to get Brown Betty back. I shall not make any complaint against him. So, if he gives up the mare, I 'd rather you let him go."

"Huh," grunted the Sheriff, with an apprehensive glance at Wilder, a full length ahead. "For God's sake, Curt, don't let Jack hear you say that! He 'd be so disgusted he 'd turn tail and go straight back to Golden!"

The fugitive kept his distance well; it seemed to Conrad's eye that he even gained a little. Now and again they could see him look back, and with spur and quirt urge the mare to a fresh burst of speed.

"Brown Betty 's a stayer," said Curtis, bringing his horse beside Tillinghurst's again, "and she 's fast. I don't believe we 'll catch him unless something happens to her."

The Sheriff turned a smiling face and said confidently, "If we get a little nearer I reckon somethin' 's likely to happen to *him*. Hello, Pendleton!" he exclaimed as the stout man came up on the other side. "That noble steed of yours is sure gettin' a gait on him, ain't

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he? If you-all don't wait for the rest of us there 'll be trouble, I 'm tellin' you!"

"Say, Sheriff," called Pendleton between his gasps and grunts as he bounced up and down, "are you going to keep up this pace all day?"

Tillinghurst eyed him benignly. "As long as he does," he said, nodding toward the fleeing spot of black down the road. "Say, Pendy," he went on in a kindly tone, "it 's a pretty stiff gait for you-all, and unless you 're anxious to take your meals standin' for the next month you 'd better drop out and go back. It 's likely to be an all-day job."

"Not much! You can't lose me till the fun 's over!"

"Hooray for Pendy! He 's all right!" yelled a man behind, giving Pendleton's horse a sharp cut across the flank with his whip. The beast jumped, and its rider lurched to one side, fell forward, and saved himself by grabbing the mane with both hands. The men shouted with merriment as Pendleton righted himself, turned a laughing face and shook his fist at the man who had played the joke on him. "Just wait till I get you where I want you, Jack Gaines," he called, "and

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you 'll be sorry you ever played tricks on a tenderfoot."

The gulch spread out into a wide, shallow valley — a draw, they called it — and the waters of the stream disappeared, sucked up by the thirsty earth. The valley curved to the east, the road climbing over its rim and holding straight toward the south. The figure of Melgares, mounted on Brown Betty as on a pedestal, stood out boldly for a moment against the turquoise sky as he crossed the summit, then sank out of sight beyond the hill. The party galloped on, and as they crossed the ridge and saw him on the top of a smaller hill beyond, Conrad's eye swept the distance lying between and he exclaimed, "We 've gained on him!"

At the same moment Little Jack Wilder, who had been watching the road intently, shouted joyously, the first words he had spoken since leaving the town, "She 's cast a shoe! Now it 's a cinch!"

Tillinghurst turned his head and shouted, "Get your gun ready, Pendy! your chance is comin'."

Jack Gaines, riding neck and neck with the Sheriff, looked back and yelled, "Come

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a-runnin', Pendy! The greaser can't wait for you all day!"

They were gaining rapidly on Melgares and, as they swept over the top of a little hill and saw him cross the next low rise, Conrad exclaimed, "She's limping, damn him! If he hurts Brown Betty—"

"You won't mind so much if we hurt him," quietly put in the Sheriff, who was riding on his lee. Curtis spurred his horse to Wilder's stirrup.

"Jack," he said, "I don't want the fellow hurt. If he'll give up my mare I'm willing to let him go."

Little Jack grunted contemptuously without replying.

"I want you to understand," Conrad went on, "that if you take him I shall make no complaint against him, provided I get Betty unhurt."

"You don't have to make no complaint," Jack growled; "I'll do that myself."

They gained steadily on the fugitive, and presently Curtis curved his hands about his mouth and called, "Betty! Betty B!" They could see the mare check her speed, and the faint sound of her whinny reached their ears. Conrad called again; and the mare wheeled

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in her tracks. The Mexican jerked her back, lashed her furiously, and set her forward again at a gallop. Curtis called again and again, and every time they could see Melgares using whip and spur to force her on. But presently the mare dropped tail and head, arched her back, and, stiff-legged, began to jump up and down.

Conrad laughed joyously and slapped his thigh. "Bully for Betty B! I never knew her to buck before."

They urged on their horses and pounded down the hill toward the small circus Brown Betty was making of herself. She cavorted, shook herself, humped her back, jumped up and down, stood on her front feet and almost sat on her tail, and did everything that equine intelligence could devise to rid herself of the masterful hand on her bridle. But the Mexican kept his seat and his grip upon the rein. With spur and quirt and compelling voice he finally forced her into submission. As she quieted down they were facing the pursuing posse and Melgares had just turned the mare's head in another desperate attempt at escape when Conrad's voice rang out once more, and Brown Betty refused to move. She tossed her head, laid back her ears, and whinnied,

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but would not lift a hoof. The Mexican drew his revolver and shouted, "Stop!"

The horsemen, not more than a hundred yards distant, drew rein at the word — all except Pendleton, who came pounding and bouncing to the front, his horse still on the gallop. Gaines, just behind Tillinghurst and Wilder, called out laughingly, "Hooray for Pendy! Go on and get him, Pendy!"

Pendleton had been too much occupied with keeping his seat to try to stop his horse, and as it went on half a length in advance of the rest Gaines leaned forward and gave it a cut across the flank with his quirt. It leaped forward smartly and Pendleton, taken unawares again, bobbed down on its neck and grabbed for its mane. Melgares saw the horse start forward and instantly his revolver flashed. The bullet left a singed streak across the back of Pendleton's coat, whistled on, and found refuge in Gaines's side.

Wilder's gun was out and cocked. He saw Pendleton lying on his horse's neck, and heard Gaines cry out, "I 'm hit!" as he fell forward across his pommel. "Stop that!" he called. "Fire again and you 're a dead man!"

Melgares leaped from the mare's back and

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ran at full speed down the valley, away from the road. Brown Betty came trotting to Conrad's side, whinnying joyfully. Pendleton sat upright, calling out, "Say, fellows, is there any blood on my back?" They told him no and as he climbed down from his saddle clumsily he grinned and said:

"Well, I can still die of consumption, then!"

Tillinghurst, Wilder, and several of the others were galloping after Melgares, who was running for his life down the valley toward a clump of cactus and juniper.

"Wing him, Jack!" called the Sheriff. "There's a crack in the ground down there where he can hide and pick us off as he pleases."

Little Jack brought his horse to a sudden stop, aimed low, and the Mexican reeled and fell, the blood gushing from a wound in the calf of his leg. He scrambled to his feet, and fired his second shot. The bullet nicked the brim of the Sheriff's hat. There was another flash, and Wilder heard the bullet sing past his ear.

"Stop it, you damned greaser!" he yelled, "or I'll let daylight through your head." In quick succession he put two holes through the

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Mexican's sombrero. "The next one is for your other eye!" he called, and Melgares dropped his weapon.

Wilder leaped to the ground and ran toward him. He glanced at the group of horsemen, each with revolver drawn, and at Wilder coming with his gun at cock, then threw back his head with his own pistol at his temple. Little Jack grabbed his arm, but Melgares fought desperately. The others came running to Wilder's assistance, and it was not until they had taken his revolver, put handcuffs upon him, and taken from his clothing another pistol, a knife, and a belt full of cartridges, that he gave up his struggles.

They put him on the horse that Conrad had ridden, with his feet tied under its belly. Tillinghurst and Wilder, revolvers in hand, rode on either side of him. Conrad, mounted on his own mare, and another were side by side with Jack Gaines laid across their laps. Two more went on at a gallop to bring out a doctor and a carriage for the wounded man. The rest rode slowly back through the hot sunlight and the high wind, guarding their captive and carrying his victim.

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CHAPTER VII

TALK OF MANY THINGS

GOLDEN prided itself upon being "the most American town in the Territory," but for all its energy and progressiveness it had not developed an ordinary regard for its own safety. After the mines which had given it birth had been worked out, it became the depot of supplies for the widespread miles of cattle country in the plains below, the mining regions in the mountains above, and the ranches scattered along the streams within a radius of fifty miles. As its importance increased a railway sought it out, the honor of being the county seat came to it, and the ruthless Anglo-Saxon arrived in such numbers and so energetically that its few contented and improvident Mexicans, thrust to one side, sank into hopeless nonentity. When Lucy Bancroft first set upon it the pleased eyes of youthful interest and filial affection, it was a busy, prosperous place of several thousand souls.

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But it still clung to the gulch wherein had been the beginning of its life and fortune. All the houses of its infancy had been built along the stream that sparkled down from the mountains, and there the town had tried to stay, regardless of the floods that occasionally swept down the canyon during the Summer rains. At first its growth had been up and down the creek; afterward cross streets had been extended far out on either side, especially where gradual hill slopes gave easy grades, and roads had also been made lengthwise along the hillsides and even on their crests, where now a goodly number of homes looked out over the plains and down upon the town-filled valley at their feet.

Newcomers gazed curiously at the high sidewalks, raised on posts above the level of the thoroughfares, asking why, if there was such possibility of flood, the people continued to live and do business along the bottom of the gulch. The residents thought the walled sidewalks rather a good joke, a humorous distinction, and laughed at the idea of danger.

Lucy Bancroft's eyes grew wide and solemn as she listened to the tale Dan Tillinghurst told her of the first year he was in Golden, years before, when a mighty torrent roared

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down the gulch, carried away most of the houses, and drowned a dozen souls. "But the very next day," he added proudly, "the people began rebuildin' their houses on the identical sites from which they had been swept."

"Why didn't they rebuild on higher ground?" Lucy asked. "And aren't you afraid there will be another flood that will destroy all these houses and perhaps kill a great many people?"

"Oh, there's no danger now," he assured her confidently. "The climate's changin'. There's not nearly so much rain as there used to be. The creek is dry half the time nowadays, and in my first years here it never went dry at all. Just look at these flood-marks," and he pointed out to her on the side of the brick building that housed her father's bank the lines to which had risen the high waters of each Summer. She saw that those of recent years were all very low. "Yes," he assured her, "the climate's changin', there's no doubt of that. There won't be any more floods."

Between Lucy and the Sheriff a mutual admiration and goodfellowship had arisen, such as might exist between an elephant and

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a robin. The day after her arrival Tillinghurst had told Bancroft that his daughter was "the prettiest piece of dry goods that had ever come to Golden, and if he ever let her pull her freight he 'd sure deserve nothin' less than tarrin' and featherin' at the hands of an outraged community."

Notwithstanding her confidence in the big Sheriff, Lucy did not like the idea of living in the gulch, and persuaded her father to build their home on the brow of the *mesa* overlooking the town from the west. She had no definite fear of the floods nor, after her first few weeks in the place, did she so much as think of danger from such a source. She liked the site on the *mesa*, although it was new and raw and treeless, because it commanded a far-reaching view, to the mountains on the west and north and, in front, across the town and the valley to the wide gray level of the plains.

She sat on the veranda of her new home with Miss Louise Dent, telling her friend what pleasure she was taking in its arrangement and direction. "At first daddy did n't want me to do it. He thought it would be too much care and responsibility for me, and that we 'd better board. But I said if a girl

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eighteen years old was n't old enough and big enough to begin to take care of her father she never would be, and so he gave up. And now! Well, you 'll see how he enjoys our home! He just beams with happiness every time he comes into the house. And I 'm perfectly happy. Daddy is so good, and it 's such a pleasure to make things nice and comfortable for him!"

"I 'm so glad," Miss Dent replied, "that you are happy here with him. He has had so many years of lonely wandering. And I know that he has long been looking forward to the time when you and he could have a home together. Your father has n't had an easy life, dear. You could never guess all that he has been through. But he is a strong and determined man, and he 's finally won success — just as I always knew he would. That 's what I admire in him so much — that he never would give up." She stopped, a faint flush mounting to her brow. Lucy threw both arms around her neck and kissed her.

"Of course, Dearie," she exclaimed, "you must appreciate my father, for you 've known him so long; but it makes me love you all the more to hear you say so — and oh, Dearie,

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I 'm going to make such a beautiful home out of this place!" Lucy looked about, her girlish face glowing with proud and pleased proprietorship. "I know how new and barren it looks now, but just wait till I 've been at work at it for a year!"

She went on to speak of her plans, asking Miss Dent's advice. In the back-yard the gaunt wings of a big windmill gave a touch of ultra modern picturesqueness and promised the fulfilment of the girl's hope of a lawn and flowers, trees and shrubbery, in the near future. A little conservatory jutted from the southern side of the house, while a deep veranda ran halfway across the eastern front and around the other two sides. The neutral, gray-green color of the structure melted into the hue of the hills and the surrounding *mesa*, leaving its barren newness less aggressive.

As they talked Lucy now and then cast a lingering glance down the street that climbed the hill from the town below, and Miss Dent thought that sometimes a shade of disappointment dimmed the bright face for an instant. She was twenty years Lucy's senior, although both looks and manner gave the lie to the fact. The loving friendship between

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them was one of those unusual ties between a younger and an older woman which, when they do occur, are apt to be marked by an overflowing measure of enthusiasm and loyalty. Louise Dent had been the intimate friend of Lucy's mother and, after her death, had given the bereaved girl such love and care and sympathy as had won her instant and ardent devotion, and the relationship thus established had grown stronger and closer as the years passed and Lucy matured into womanhood. The girl's enthusiastic affection had enabled her to find in Louise Dent intimate friend, elder sister, and mother combined. This complicated feeling making it impossible for her to address the elder woman by either formal title or first name, she had soon settled upon "Dearie" as a substantive term expressing their relationship, and "Dearie" Miss Dent had been to her ever since, whether between themselves or among her own intimate friends.

As the shadows grew longer and the hot white sunlight became less vivid, Lucy seemed to grow restless. She rose and moved about the veranda, or ran down into the yard and back upon some trivial errand, each time stopping on the steps to send an inquiring

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eye down the street. Standing there, when the afternoon was far spent and the fierce westerly wind had ebbed into a gentle breeze, she pointed out to Louise the statuesque sapphire mass of Mangan's Peak against the turquoise blue of the eastern sky, and told her of the drive thither and back she and her father had taken a fortnight before, and of their call at Socorro Springs ranch. "It's an interesting place," she went on; "such a huge ranch! Why, its grazing rights extend more than a hundred miles south, away across the Mexican border. Father knows the superintendent very well, and we'll get him to drive us out there some day." A higher color rose in her cheeks; she quickly turned away, drew her chair well back, and sat down. "There's Mr. Conrad, the superintendent, coming up the hill now!" she exclaimed. "Daddy told me at luncheon that he was in town."

Lucy bore her new role of hostess with a dignity so easy and gracious that it surprised Louise, and made Conrad think her more attractive than ever. Bancroft came a little later, and Curtis was urged to stay to dinner. Lucy showed him in her conservatory the collection of cactus plants she had begun to

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make and listened with eager interest while he gave her information about the growth of the species she already had, and told her where she could find others less common. She was anxious to have his opinion whether it would be possible to make a hedge of mesquite to replace the wooden paling around the yard; he did not know, but offered to help her try the experiment.

They dined on the side veranda, where Lucy, with the help of a screen or two and some plants from her green-house, had contrived an out-of-doors dining-room. The high spirits of the two younger people dominated the conversation, as they jested and bantered, laughed, and crossed wits in little wordy sword-plays that called forth applause and encouragement from the others. Lucy sparkled and dimpled, and her color rose, while Curtis's eyes darkened and flashed. Miss Dent, watching them, realized what an attractive young woman Lucy had grown to be, and how much she had blossomed out even in the few months since their last parting. "She will have plenty of admirers," the older woman thought, with a little twinge at her heart. Still, she was very young, and it would be a long time yet before she would think of

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marriage. But — if she were to marry and leave her father — he would be very lonely — perhaps — and then she felt her cheeks grow warmer, and hastened to resume her part in the conversation.

Louise was pleased with Conrad's face. It seemed full of character, with its broad brow, tanned cheeks, large nose, and well-set chin. She noted especially the strong, firm jaw and chin, saying to herself that they betokened a strength of will and constancy of purpose that foretold success in whatever he might undertake. He was amusing them with an account of the feud between the wives of the Castleton brothers.

"But don't the men take up the quarrels of their wives," Louise asked, "or allow any feeling to come between them?"

"Not in the least; nor does there seem to be any ill-feeling between the ladies. They are always good friends, and the men look upon the whole thing as a good joke. If Mrs. Turner, for instance, cooks up some new scheme for getting the better of Mrs. Ned, she tells her husband about it, he tells Ned, and they laugh over it and make bets about which will win."

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Lucy was interested in the Castleton ladies. Conrad said that Mrs. Turner Castleton was considered a great beauty, but that he liked Mrs. Ned, who was half Mexican, much the better and thought her the more interesting and charming. She asked if they ever visited the ranch. "Yes," said Curtis; "Ned and his wife come up for a few days every Spring. This year they 'll be there after the round-up is over and the cattle shipped. Would you like to meet them? All right, we 'll arrange it. While they are there I 'll get up a barbecue and a *baile*, and ask some people. You and Miss Dent and your father must all come."

The American in the Southwest, arrogant and contemptuous as the Anglo-Saxon always is when brought face to face with a difference in race, a difference in ideals, or a difference in speech, regards the Spanish language with frank disdain and ordinarily refuses to learn it. But where the Mexicans are present in large numbers, as in New Mexico, he adopts from the other's language a good many words which soon supplant their English equivalents. An evening party of any sort, whether a public dance in the town hall, a select affair in the house of a prominent

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resident, or a gathering in the Mexican quarter, is always a "*baile*," a thriftless, insignificant person of either race a "*paisano*," while upon "*coyote*" the American has seized with ready tongue, applying it to any creature, human or other, for which he wishes to express supreme contempt.

Miss Dent had to have *baile* explained to her, and their talk drifted to the subject of the Mexican people. Bancroft told her the story of the bold theft of Conrad's mare, the chase and capture of Melgares, and the wounding of Gaines. "It is thought that poor Jack cannot live," he said in conclusion, "and the Mexican is held in jail to await the result. If he dies the fellow will be tried for murder."

"I 've heard a queer story about Melgares," said Conrad, and went on to tell how the Mexican had lost his little ranch. Lucy listened attentively, with indignant eyes fixed on Curtis's face.

"How shameful!" she broke out. "What a detestable way of getting money! The poor Mexicans! Just think of their being turned out of their homes in that way, with nothing to fall back on! I don't wonder poor Melgares became a thief — but he ought to have

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gone to Santa Fe and stolen Mr. Baxter's horses!"

Bancroft's eyes were fixed on his plate. Had the others been watching him closely they would have seen no more than a flicker of his eyelids as his face took on a stony impassiveness. But they were looking at Lucy who, with head erect, face flushed, and eyes sparkling, made a pretty picture.

"I 'm glad you feel that way, Miss Bancroft," Curtis exclaimed, his face alight with approval and admiration. "I think myself it 's about as despicable a way of getting money legally as man ever devised. Baxter knows when he loans the money that the poor wretches will never be able to pay back a cent of it. He would n't loan it to them if he thought they could, for it 's their land he 's after. I 've heard that he 's getting control in this way of a big tract in the Rio Grande valley and that he intends to form a company, advertise it through the East, and sell the land, which is really valuable, at big prices."

"Well, I think it 's a shameful piece of business, and I 'm surprised that Mr. Baxter is engaged in it!" said Lucy with decision.

"Before you condemn him so severely, daughter," interposed Bancroft, his eyes still

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lowered, "you should remember that the business of the loan mortgage companies has the full sanction of law and custom, and that many of the most reputable business men of the United States have engaged in it."

"I can't help it, daddy, if all the Congressmen and lawyers and business men, and preachers too, in the United States are engaged in it — that does n't make it right. Somehow it seems a different matter with these poor Mexicans, they are so helpless. Why, it 's almost like stealing their homes. I 'm sorry, daddy, to speak so about Mr. Baxter, but that 's really the way I feel about it; I suppose he does n't realize what an injury he 's doing them. Oh, daddy," and she leaned forward eagerly, her face flushing, "you and he are such good friends, maybe you could tell him what harm he 's doing and persuade him to give up that part of his business!"

Conrad smiled grimly. "It 's plain, Miss Bancroft," he said, without waiting for her father to reply, "that you are not intimately acquainted with Dell Baxter. I 'm sorry about this Melgares business, for I can't help feeling a sort of responsibility. If the fellow is hung his family will be left destitute. Yes, he has a wife and four children," he

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continued in answer to Miss Dent. "I had a talk with him about the affair, and he asked me to send for his family for him. He had money with which to pay their fares, though where he got it probably would n't bear too close an inquiry."

Lucy was looking at him eagerly, her face full of sympathy. "The poor things!" she exclaimed. "When they come you must let me know, Mr. Conrad."

Bancroft abruptly changed the subject, and presently the talk drifted to a story that had just come out about the postmaster at Randall. "It 's a characteristic New Mexican tale," said Curtis, turning to the ladies. "You 'll soon find out, Miss Bancroft, if you don't know it already, that the cowboy song of 'What was your name in the States?' can often be applied in earnest."

"Confound the fellow," thought Bancroft irritably, "why is he always harping on that subject!"

"This is a particularly audacious case, though — don't you think so, Aleck?" Curtis went on. "Here this man has been living for several years in Randall, a respected citizen, holding office, with influence in the community, when, behold, it is discovered that just

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before coming here he had skipped from some town in Missouri, where he was postmaster, with all the money in his office and another man's wife. But his sin has finally found him out."

"It always does," observed Lucy coolly.

Louise Dent was conscious of a fluttering in her throat and realized that her heart was beating loudly. The moment's pause that followed seemed to her so long that she rushed into speech, without thought of what she said: "I 'm afraid it does."

"Why do you say 'afraid,' Dearie?" asked Lucy, with surprise. "Is n't it right that it should?"

Louise made brief and noncommittal reply and Bancroft hurriedly asked Curtis how the round-up was getting on.

"Well, we 've got the thing started, and are ready to move the cattle on the north part of the range toward Pelham. We 'll begin shipping within two or three weeks. But something seems to have struck the cowboy market this year; I 've been short of hands all the Spring."

"Perhaps I can give you some help," said Bancroft. "A Mexican from up North has been to me looking for work. He came the

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day you had the chase after Melgares and was in again to-day. He has worked for Baxter, and Dell says he is an expert cowboy and sure to give satisfaction."

"He must be an unusual sort of greaser if he's looking for work," laughed Conrad. "If he's that sort, I guess he'll strike my gait."

They found the Mexican sitting on the steps of the front veranda when they finished dinner.

"Why," exclaimed Curtis with hearty interest, "he's the same chap that told me my mare was stolen. I hope you can ride and throw a rope; I'm obliged to you already, and I'd like to do you a good turn. I'll meet you down town presently, and if you know anything about the business I'll take you behind me on my mare to the ranch to-night, and you can go to work in the morning."

The moon had just risen, and its huge white disk seemed to be resting on the plain only a little way beyond the town. Its brilliant silvery light was already working weird transformations in the landscape.

"Oh, are you going to ride home to-night, through this wonderful moonlight!" Lucy exclaimed. "How I envy you!"

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"Yes," he answered, lowering his voice and speaking in a tone different from any she had before heard from his lips; "and it is indeed a wonderful ride! I don't know anything more impressive than the landscape of this country under a marvellous moon, like that over there. I hope we can have a ride by moonlight together, some time, when the moon is full. Does Miss Dent ride?" His voice went back to its usual tone. "I know your father is a fine rider. Perhaps we can make up a party some night, when I don't have to hurry home. I expect my brother here this Summer, to spend his vacation with me. You and Miss Dent will like him, I 'm sure, for he 's a fine lad. I hope we can all have some pleasant excursions together."

At the sound of his softened voice Lucy felt herself swept by sudden emotion, and hastily put her hands behind her lest he should see that they were trembling. And later that night, when she looked out from her window at the white moon floating in the violet sky, suddenly her nerves went a-quiver again and her eyes sought the far, dim plain as she softly whispered, "Under a marvellous moon, like that over there!"

The Mexican asked Bancroft how to reach

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the place where Conrad was to meet him, and the banker walked to the gate and pointed out the streets he was to follow. As he finished Gonzalez bent a keen gaze upon him and asked, significantly, "Has the señor further instructions for me?"

Bancroft's start and the shade of annoyance that crossed his face as he realized that it had been noticed were not lost upon the man, whose searching look was still on him. His equanimity had been well tried already that evening, and this sudden touch upon a half-formed and most secret desire startled him for an instant out of his usual self-control. Heretofore he had merely dallied with the thought that Conrad's removal would mean his own safety, for the rest of his life. It had appeared to him merely as something the consequences of which would be desirable. His hand could not be concerned in it, he wished to know nothing about it — but if Baxter thought best — to further his own ends — why had the Mexican come to him with this impudent question?

"I 'm not hiring you," was his curt answer.

"Certainly not, señor," the man answered calmly, his head erect, his arms folded, and one foot advanced. The trio on the veranda

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noted and laughed over his attitude. Lucy said he looked like a hero of melodrama taking the limelight. Miss Dent added that he was handsome enough for a matinee idol, and Conrad declared that there was no telling how many señoritas' hearts he had already broken. Bancroft turned to go back to the house, but paused an instant, and the Mexican quickly went on in a softly insinuating voice: "But if the señor should wish to say anything particular? Don Dellmey thought it might be possible."

Bancroft lingered, flicking the ashes from his cigar. "I— I know nothing about it," he blurted out, uncertainly. "If Don Dellmey had anything to say to you I suppose he said it."

As he turned away he heard the man say gently, "Thank you, Señor Bancroft. I shall not forget our talk." There was no reply, and the Mexican, whistling a Spanish love tune, disappeared down the hill in the weird mixed lights of the fading day and the brilliant moon.

Alone on the veranda, Alexander Bancroft walked restlessly to and fro, stopping now and again as if to listen to the music from within, which he did not hear, or to look at the

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moonlit landscape, which he did not see. Over and over he was saying to himself that he had no idea what Dellmey Baxter had said to this Mexican, and, whatever it was, he had distinctly told the creature that he knew nothing about it. The man had come to him recommended as an expert cowboy, he had passed the recommendation on to Conrad, and that was all there was about it.

Nevertheless, he knew he had reason to believe — the Congressman had intimated as much in his letter — that the man who called himself José Gonzalez was in reality Liberato Herrara, guilty of at least one murder and probably of others, whom Baxter's legal skill had saved from the gallows. Curtis had said that he should carry the man behind him to the ranch that night. Before Bancroft's inward eye a sudden vision opened: wide miles of silent plain, a great white moon hanging low in the sky, a long stretch of deserted road, and then two men on a single horse — and the light gleaming on a long knife! He shuddered as the blade flashed, and turned his face away from the plain. Then, as there came to him a sudden sense of tremendous relief, with breath and thought suspended he turned slowly, fascinatedly, and with greedy

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eyes searched the distant plain, as if eager to find in it some proof, at last, of his own safety.

Lucy's voice rose in a gay little song above the piano and fell upon his ears. With a deep, long-drawn breath his thought leaped out and seized upon all that freedom from Curtis Conrad's pursuit would mean for him. José Gonzalez would sink out of sight, and Liberato Herrara would be back in his own home, unsuspected and silent. Some excitement would follow, search would be made, a body would be found in a mesquite thicket, — and then the interest would die out, and there would be only another grewsome tale of mystery to be added to the hundreds already told through the Southwest. And he—Alexander Bancroft—would be safe—secure in fortune and reputation and the love and honor of his daughter as long as they should live.

The music within ceased and Lucy's voice rippled out in girlish laughter. His heart sank as he seemed to hear again her hot denunciation of Baxter's loan and mortgage operations. "I 'll sell out to Dell and she 'll never know I 've had anything to do with it," he thought. Then there came ringing through his memory, as he had heard them so many

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times since they rode home from the Socorro Springs ranch, her passionate words, "He must have been a wicked man," and "I should hate him, with all my strength," and again his longing face turned impulsively toward the plain.

"I 'd kill him myself, rather than let her find out," he whispered, with teeth set. "And a man has got to protect himself out here!" his urgent thought went on. "I 'll be a fool if I don't stop him before he gets his chance at me!" With a sudden stirring of conscience he remembered that this man whose death he was so ardently desiring was his friend and trusted his friendship. "I — I don't want him stuck in the back," he muttered. "I might warn him. He may not have started yet."

He walked uncertainly toward the veranda steps. There was a flutter of white drapery and Lucy was laying an affectionate hand on his arm. "Oh, daddy dear," she coaxed, "won't you come in and try this duet with us? Dearie will play the accompaniment for us to sing. She brought it to me, and I 'm dying to try it."

"Yes, if you wish it, daughter," the banker replied, hesitation in his voice, "but I was

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thinking of going down town." He saw the shade of disappointment that crossed her face, and drew her hand into his arm. "It does n't matter," he went on, "and I would rather stay at home." To himself he said as they moved to the door, "Conrad has gone by this time, and, anyway, I 've no reason to think this Mexican intends to do him any harm."

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CHAPTER VIII

SPECTRES OF THE PAST

RESTLESS was the night that followed for Alexander Bancroft; his sleep was troubled by many a dream in which one friend after another moved swiftly on to violent death. With the coming of dawn he arose to look out from the eastern windows of his room. The sky was a dome of rosy light and below lay the vast plain, dim but colorful, its gray-green mottled with vague bands and patches of opalescent lights and shadows and dotted with little islands of vivid green. His eyes clung to these darker spots, which he knew to be thickets of mesquite; piercing their shade his inner vision showed him the still body of his friend. So real was the mental picture that he turned pale about the lips and abruptly left the window.

If anything had happened, he kept reassuring himself, it had been at Dellmey Baxter's instigation. He himself had had nothing to do with it. If Baxter had decided that his

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affairs would go more smoothly with Conrad out of the way, why should he, Alexander Bancroft, trouble himself further? And if — anything had happened — again he felt the loosening of mental strain and his spirits rose in exultation at the prospect of freedom and safety. Life was more attractive than ever with that menacing figure no longer threatening him with disclosure, disgrace, and death. He could go on with his plans for the accumulation of fortune and the enjoyment of life. He could still hold Lucy's love and honor, travel with her, marry again, work his way to a commanding place in the world of business. The future opened before him as easy and inviting as the stairs down which he went to breakfast.

Lucy ran to meet him with a good-morning kiss and a rose for his buttonhole. "It 's the prettiest I could find in my conservatory," she smiled at him; "but it is n't half nice enough for my daddy dear. You don't look well this morning, daddy," she went on anxiously. "Is anything the matter?"

His hand slipped caressingly down over her curls and drew her to his breast in a quick embrace, instinct with the native impulse of the animal to protect its offspring. "She

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shall never know," was the thought in his mind.

"Daddy! What a bear hug that was!" she laughed, "like those you used to give me when I was a little girl. It did n't feel as if you were ill."

"I 'm not," he answered lightly, kissing her pink cheek. "I guess I smoked too much yesterday, and so did n't sleep very well. Yes; I promise; I 'll be more careful to-day."

At breakfast his eyes dwelt much upon Louise Dent's face, gentle and pleasant. He had always liked her, and since her coming on this visit she had seemed very attractive. He knew she had strength and poise of character and a nature refined and cheerful. These qualities in her, with a certain genial, unobtrusive companionableness, had long ago won his warm friendship. But was there not in her steady gray eyes a hint of passionate depths he had never thought of before? It stirred him so deeply that for a little while, as they lingered over the breakfast table, he forgot the other facts of life, noting the faint rose flush in her cheeks, the graceful turn of her wrists, and the soft whiteness of her throat as she threw back her head and laughed. And Lucy loved her so devotedly! If she were

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willing to marry him their household would surely be harmonious and happy.

Lucy fluttered beside him to the gate, her arm in his, as she chattered to him of the funny things her Chinese cook had been saying and doing. She lingered there, her eyes following his figure, until he turned, half a block away, to wave his hat in response to her farewell handkerchief.

By the time he reached the foot of the hill Bancroft's mind was once more engrossed with the need of knowing whether or not he was at last secure from ignominious exposure. He no longer disguised from himself the fact that news of Conrad's death would be most welcome. He looked eagerly up and down the main streets; there was no sign of excitement. Had nothing happened, then? But it was still early; moreover, news of the affair might not reach the town for a day or two. The sound of horses' feet coming at a swift trot down the street on the other side of the stream made his heart beat quickly. He lingered at the door of his bank until the horseman came into view under the big cottonwoods at the next corner. It was Red Jack from the Socorro Springs ranch. At once his heart leaped to certainty. He turned to enter the bank, but stopped and

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looked back, undecidedly. Red Jack had not dismounted, but had drawn rein in front of the court-house at the next corner, and was sitting there quietly, looking up and down the road as if expecting somebody. He led a saddled horse. Perhaps he was to take a physician back with him. But he seemed in no haste, and in his manner there was neither excitement nor anxiety. Bancroft could wait no longer to learn what had happened. With hands in pockets he sauntered down the street.

"Hello, Jack," he said indifferently to the waiting horseman. "You 're in town early this morning."

"I sure hiked along from the ranch early enough," the cowboy replied. "The boss hired a new man last night; and I had to come over this morning after him."

Bancroft's eyes were on the cigar he was taking from his pocket, which he handed to the cowboy, saying idly, "Why, he intended last night to carry the man behind him. Did he change his mind? The man was a Mexican, was n't he?"

"Y-e-s; a measly coyote! The boss did n't bring him last night because he thought it would be too hard on Brown Betty to carry double. I wonder if mebby that ain't my man

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comin' down the street right now! I 've done forgot his name; do you happen to know it, Mr. Bancroft?"

"I think it 's José Gonzalez. He came here from Dellmey Baxter, who recommended him to me as a first-rate cowboy."

"Well, he 'll have to be a peach if he strikes the boss's gait," Red Jack rejoined, motioning to the Mexican.

Bancroft walked back to his place of business with brows knitted and mouth drawn into grim lines. His mind was acting rapidly and ruthlessly. The sudden collapse of his house of cards, the knowledge that danger was still as imminent as ever, left him savage with desire for Curtis Conrad's death, or, rather, for the delectable land that lay beyond it. Nobody but this young hothead with his insensate desire for revenge knew or cared anything about that old affair now. With him out of the way there would be no danger from anybody or anything. Why was n't the man sensible enough to take the money he was willing to pay, and be satisfied? Perhaps the receipt of another check or two would soften his purpose; it was worth trying. And — there was still the Mexican! Baxter had surely said something to him, and the fellow seemed

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to understand that he, also — but he had said nothing about it, and whatever the creature suspected was his own inference. Evidently the Mexican did suspect something and had some purpose in his mind. With Conrad so intent upon his destruction had he not every right to protect himself and his child? Of course he had, he told himself fiercely, and what means he might use were his own affair.

At the door of the bank Rutherford Jenkins met him with a smiling salutation: "Good-morning, Mr. Bancroft; this is lucky! I was waiting for you here, but I 've got so much to do that I 'd begun to be afraid I would n't be able to see you before I go back."

Bancroft greeted him pleasantly. "What do you mean, Jenkins," he went on, "by deserting to Martinez? Had n't you better think again about that? We need you on our side."

"That 's exactly what I want to see you about," said Jenkins in a confidential tone. "Can't you come over with me to Bill Williams's hotel for a few minutes? I want to have a talk with you."

They went back together, Bancroft wondering if Jenkins, who was regarded as a desirable ally by both parties, notwithstanding his character, was about to make overtures to him

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for deserting the Martinez fold and coming back to Baxter's. "Perhaps that spanking Curt gave him has set him against the whole Martinez following," he thought. "Baxter will be mighty glad to get him back, and I 'll do my best to cinch the bargain so he can't crawl."

When they entered the hotel room Jenkins moved leisurely about, got out a bottle of whiskey, and hunted up some cigars, talking all the time glibly about other matters and jumping inconsequently from one subject to another. Bancroft made several attempts to bring the conversation to the point, but each time Jenkins either blandly ignored or skilfully evaded his leading. Finally Bancroft said, looking at his watch: "Well, Jenkins, I 've got to be at the bank very soon, and if there 's anything particular you want to say suppose we get down to business."

"Yes, yes, certainly," Jenkins replied unconcernedly. "That 's what I 'm coming to right now." He gave Bancroft a cigar, lighted one himself, made some jokes as he bustled aimlessly around the room, and at last sat down on the foot of the bed, facing the banker, who occupied the only chair in the little room. He ceased speaking, and

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Bancroft, looking up suddenly, caught in his face an expression of expectant triumph. The tip of his tongue was darting over his lips, and his small dark eyes were fixed on his guest with a look of malicious satisfaction. Instantly Bancroft's nerves were alert with the sense of coming danger. He blew out a whiff of smoke and calmly returned the other's gaze. Their eyes met thus, the one gloating, the other outwardly unmoved but inwardly astart with sudden alarm. Then Jenkins began, in a blandly insinuating tone:

"Before we come to that matter about Martinez, I want to ask you, Mr. — ah — Mr. Dela — ah, I beg your pardon, Mr. Bancroft — I thought I would ask you — you 've poked about a good deal, out here in the West — and in out-of-the-way places, too — and I 've been wondering — I thought I 'd ask you — if you 've ever run across a gentleman of the name of — of — Dela — Dela — let me see — yes, Delafield — that 's it — Sumner L. Delafield, of Boston. Do you remember whether or not you've ever met him?"

Bancroft did not blanch nor flinch. For so many years he had schooled himself to such constant watchfulness and incessant self-control that an impassive countenance

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and manner had become a habit. Lucy, with her uncompromising moral decisions and her swift, unsparing condemnations, could come nearer to unnerving him than could any bolt from the blue like this. He flicked the ash from his cigar, hesitating a moment as if searching his memory, but really wondering whether Jenkins knew anything or was merely guessing and trying to draw him out. The latter seemed much the more likely.

"I can't say on the instant whether I ever met such a man or not. As you say, I have gone about a good deal and, as my business most of the time has been that of mining and trading in mines, it has often taken me into out-of-the-way places, and I have met a great many people. At this moment I don't recall the name."

"Don't you? I 'm sorry, for I thought perhaps you could verify for me a curious story about the man that has just come to my knowledge. You know I 'm always picking up information about people — I find it comes in handy now and then. Well, if you 've never met him, have you ever, in the course of your Western travels, run across a man — he was a mining man, too — a mining man named Hardy — John Mason Hardy?

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There 's a curious story about him, too, or, rather, about a man who was associated with him in a mining enterprise down in old Mexico. The other man's name was Smith — a very serviceable name is Smith; sort of like a black derby hat; no distinguishing mark about it and easy to exchange by mistake if you 'd rather have some other man's."

Bancroft rose and looked at his watch. "If there 's anything of particular interest or importance in this, Mr. Jenkins, I 'll be very glad to listen to it some other time; but I can't stay any longer this morning. I ought to have been at my desk half an hour ago."

Jenkins sat still and waved him back with insistent politeness. "One moment more, Mr. Bancroft, if you please. I 'm coming to the point right away. This story is of some consequence to me, and I 'd like to know if you can verify it. Have another drink."

Bancroft swallowed the whiskey at a gulp and Jenkins noticed that his fingers trembled as he took the glass. He was thinking, "I 'd better stay and find out exactly how much he knows." Jenkins smiled under his hand as he smoothed his straggling moustache and watched Bancroft wipe the sweat from his forehead.

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"This man Smith," Jenkins continued, "John was his name, too — John Smith and John Mason Hardy were partners in a mining enterprise down in Mexico. One of them died down there — died, you know, in a quiet, private sort of way, and the one that came up to the States again was named Hardy, but it was n't the same Hardy that had gone down there. You might guess, if you wanted to, that Smith killed Hardy and took his name — "

He stopped and drew back suddenly, for Bancroft had sprung forward with a white, angry face and was shaking a trembling fist under his nose.

"Stop there, you liar!" he exclaimed in low, tense tones. "I did n't do that. He died a natural death — of fever — and I took care of him and did my best to save his life."

Jenkins recovered his self-possession first. "Oh; then you know all about it!" he said dryly, with a malicious smile.

Bancroft sank back in his chair drawing his hand across his eyes and wondering why his self-control had so suddenly gone to pieces. He had thought himself proof against any surprise, but this man's sudden blow and persistent baiting had screwed his nerve tension to

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the snapping point. But he told himself that it probably did not matter anyway, as Jenkins evidently knew the whole story. With a desperate, defiant look he turned upon his tormentor.

"Well, what do you want?" he demanded sharply. "Why have you raked up this old story?"

"Oh, I found it interesting," Jenkins responded in a leisurely way, "as an instance of the way things are done on the frontier and, as I told you at first, I thought you might be able to verify it. For I was inclined not to believe it, especially as it was about one of the most prominent and respected citizens of New Mexico. But since you 've confessed its truth yourself — well, I 've got to believe it now. It has been a very blind trail I 've followed, crooked and well hidden — wonderfully well hidden, Mr. Bancroft — and the number of names you 've hoisted along its course has been bewildering. But I 've managed to track you through 'em all, and to discover in Alexander Bancroft, the upright, honored, public-spirited citizen of New Mexico, the identical person of Sumner L. Delafield, the defaulting and absconding financier of Boston."

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Bancroft looked Jenkins sullenly in the eye. "Well, now that you have it all, what are you going to do about it?"

"Pardon me, Mr. Bancroft," said Jenkins with exaggerated suavity, "ah, excuse me, I mean Mr. Delafield — that is for you to say."

The banker considered for a moment only. Evidently this man knew exactly what he was about and exactly what he wanted, so that it would be of no use to beat around the bush. "Will you please say precisely what you mean?" was his answer.

"That is just what I have been doing, Mr. Delafield."

"Excuse me, Jenkins, but my name is Bancroft, not Delafield. I have a legal right to the name of Bancroft, given me by the legislature of Arizona. You will oblige me by addressing me in that way."

"Oh, yes; I know that; and a lot of trouble I had with this chase until I found it out! But I thought you might like to hear yourself called Delafield once more — sort of like meeting an old friend, you know. Won't you have another cigar, Mr. Bancroft? No? Well, then, let's have another drink." He poured out two glasses of whiskey. Bancroft

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drank his without demur, but Jenkins barely touched his glass to his lips.

"Well, now, Mr. Bancroft," Jenkins went on affably, smiling and rubbing his hands together, "let's get down to the practical side of this romantic story from real life. You are getting on so well here under your present name, and you have a young daughter —" he saw his listener wince at this, and then carefully repeated his words — "and you have such a beautiful and charming young daughter, who, as the heiress of a father who is making a fortune with clean hands and no cloud on his past, can be taken about the world and can make a good marriage some of these days; considering all this, I take it for granted that you would prefer to have this story buried too deep for resurrection. And it is for you to say whether it shall be buried or not."

Bancroft sat in silence for a full minute, glaring at the man opposite, his lips set in a livid line. Jenkins grew nervous in the dead stillness of the room, and began to fidget. He cautiously rested his right hand on the bed close by his pistol pocket, and kept his eyes on the banker, watchful for the first hostile movement. There was need of

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wariness, for Bancroft was debating with himself whether it would be better to go on to the dreary end of this business and leave the room with a blackmailer's noose around his neck, or to whip out his gun, put a bullet through this man's brain, and another through his own.

But the fragrance of life rose sweet to his nostrils, and his innate virility spurred him on to keep up the fight. Apparently he had brought up against a stone wall, but he had fought too long and too desperately to be willing to confess himself beaten until he could struggle no longer. He felt sure that money would keep Jenkins quiet, and after a while he might find some other means of stopping the man's mouth for good. The fellow was always in some dirty job or other, and before long doubtless some hold on him would become possible. There was Conrad still to be reckoned with — but that could wait, at least until this man was silenced.

"Well," he said quietly, "what do you want? For God's sake, come to the point!"

Jenkins drew a breath of relief. "Well, Mr. Bancroft, I 'm interested this year in the success of Johnny Martinez. It 's a matter of the first importance to me for him to be

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elected. But I 'm afraid he has n't got much chance if Silverside County and the rest of the South should go against him. Now, you 've got more influence down here then anybody else, and you can swing it for him if you want to. That 's what I want you to do."

Bancroft looked up in sudden dismay. He had not expected anything of this sort. "You know I 'm committed to Baxter," he said.

"Oh, yes; I know. But that 's nothing. In New Mexico it 's not difficult to change your politics. Why, I thought of coming out for Baxter myself at first; but I 'm solid for Martinez now."

Bancroft rose and began pacing the half-dozen steps to and fro that the room afforded, seeking some loophole of escape from his obligations to Baxter. There were mortgages the Congressman could foreclose that would balk some of the banker's most promising plans should he attempt political treachery. He could, and undoubtedly would, reveal his associate's connection with the loan and mortgage operations in the Rio Grande valley; and Bancroft winced as he thought of this coming to Lucy's ears. And in that

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matter of Curtis Conrad and José Gonzalez — had he not put himself at Baxter's mercy? In this moment of supreme necessity the naked truth came before him; and he knew it to be true that he was primarily responsible for any harm that might come to the young cattleman through Gonzalez. If he did not keep faith with Baxter the Congressman would tell Curtis who it was that desired his death; and then Conrad would know where to find Delafield. In short, he knew that Baxter would stop at nothing to compel his loyalty or punish his treason. Having contemplated no course except that of fidelity in his business and political relations with Baxter, the closeness of their alliance had heretofore given him little uneasiness; and now, in this crisis, he found himself wholly in the other's power. He flung himself into his chair, his face pallid and the perspiration standing in great drops on his forehead. His breath came hard and his voice was thick as he asked:

"Is there no alternative?"

"Well, no; none that I can accept," Jenkins replied meditatively. "You see, it's a very important matter for me to be able to make this present to Johnny. If he wins this fight there'll be something big in it for me.

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No; I 'll have to insist upon this as the first condition."

Bancroft's lips moved soundlessly as he stared at the man sitting on the edge of the bed, nursing his knee and showing his white teeth in a triumphant smile. Then, suddenly, without a word of warning, the banker leaped forward and seized his companion around the throat. Jenkins, taken entirely off his guard, succeeded only in grasping his assailant's coat as they went down on the bed together in a noiseless scuffle. Bancroft's hands closed around his tormentor's throat, and a savage, elemental satisfaction thrilled in him and goaded him on. More and more tightly his fingers clutched as Jenkins struggled under his grip. Neither of them uttered a sound, and the silence of the room was broken only by the creaking of the bed or the occasional knocking of a foot against the chair.

Bancroft's face was snarled like that of a wild beast as he watched Jenkins's visage grow livid and his struggles weaken. Of a sudden reason returned to him. If this man were to die under his hand there would be grewsome consequences — and he had enough to deal with already. He stood up, trembling, and looked anxiously at the still form on the bed.

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"You — you're not dead, Jenkins, are you?" he stammered awkwardly.

Jenkins stirred a little, opened his eyes, put his hand to his throat, and got up, looking warily at his assailant. "It's no thanks to you that I'm not," he responded sullenly.

"I didn't mean to kill you — but you — you struck me too hard — it drove me wild — and for a minute I didn't know what I was doing." Jenkins scowled, rubbed his throat again, and drank a glass of whiskey. Bancroft helped himself likewise, following it with a copious draught of water. As they faced each other again Jenkins edged away suspiciously toward the door; but Bancroft went back at once to the unsettled question.

"It would ruin me, financially and in every other way, to go back on Baxter. You might just as well kill me outright as insist upon that."

"But I'm going to insist upon it," was Jenkins's sullen answer.

Bancroft made a despairing gesture. "But I tell you, Jenkins, the thing's impossible! It would ruin me just as surely as for you to tell all you know. You'll have to be satisfied with something else."

Jenkins leaned against the bed and stared

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angrily at Bancroft. Physical pain had made him obstinate and determined him to press his point, more to return injury for injury than because he wanted that particular thing.

"I tell you now," Bancroft went on, "that I 'd rather take the last way out than try to go back on Baxter. It would n't be the healthiest thing in the world for you if I should kill myself shut up in this room with you, would it?"

"Well, I 'll waive that for the present," Jenkins replied unwillingly; "but, mind you, it 's only for the present. We 'll talk about it again, later in the season. For the present I want a good, big sum before you leave this room, and hereafter I 've got to have a regular monthly payment, a check on the first of every month when I don't come after the cash myself."

Bancroft considered for only a moment. His dilemma was clear: he must either buy this haltered freedom from Jenkins or kill him in his tracks. This latter alternative was not to be considered; and doubtless before long it would be possible to turn the tables on the creature and escape from his clutches.

Jenkins folded away in his pocketbook a check and a roll of bills and smiled as he

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looked at Bancroft's haggard face. "I hope, Mr. Dela — ah, pardon me, — Mr. Bancroft, that I have not kept you too long from your affairs at the bank." As his eyes followed the banker's disappearing figure with a gleam of satisfaction, he patted his breast pocket and whispered:

"Now for the other score!"

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CHAPTER IX

PERILS IN THE NIGHT

RED JACK and José Gonzalez joined the forces of the Socorro Springs ranch while the cattle of the morning's round-up were being driven to the watering-place near the ranch house. Across the road from the house stood a large grove of cottonwoods; a little beyond that, in the valley, a deep pond had been dug, into which flowed the outlets from the several springs. The cattle from a score of miles roundabout were accustomed to come to this pond, with its circling belt of trees, for water and for midday rest in the shade.

Here the round-up was in progress, and Conrad galloped out to meet the new hand and give him instructions. As he rode off toward the hills after a bunch of straggling cattle Curtis looked after him with an approving eye. "He knows how to fork a horse, at least," he thought. In the afternoon José was set to work cutting out and bunching the

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two- and three-year-old steers and later at helping with the branding. Conrad watched his handling of the branding irons, and he and all the rest stopped their work to follow his movements with critical eyes as he roped and brought to the ground a belligerent steer. The superintendent was well satisfied. "At last I 've got a man who knows the business and has some *sabe*," he thought. "If he goes on as well as he begins I 'll keep him after the shipping is done."

The next day the round-up crept slowly southward, accompanied by the chuck-wagon and a drove of fresh horses. At noon the cattle gathered during the morning were bunched at Adobe Springs, the next watering-place toward the Mexican border. Gonzalez was the only Mexican among the cowboys, the rest being Americans of one sort or another — from Texas, Colorado, the Northwest, and the Middle West. All felt toward him the contemptuous scorn born of difference in race and consequent conviction of superior merit. They had no scruples about making known their prejudice, and more than once his face flushed and his hand darted toward the knife hidden in his bosom. Yet, as the day wore on and they saw that he excelled the

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best of them in handling the lasso and in the cunning of his movements when cutting out the steers from the herd, they began to show him the respect that skill of any sort inspires in those who know with what effort it is acquired.

After supper, when they gathered about the campfire, smoking, and scoffing good-naturedly at one another's tales of wondrous experiences, and talking over the events of the day just gone, they received him upon an equality with themselves which was only slightly grudged. He told them, in English more precise than any of them could speak, of Conrad's encounter with Rutherford Jenkins in the Blue Front, and their appreciation of the tale completed the work which his skill as a cowboy had begun. Thereafter they looked upon José as a comrade and a good fellow.

Three small adobe houses, of one room each, with flat roofs and earthen floors, had been built here, as the large and never-failing springs made the spot a sure rendezvous for every round-up. The locality was infested by skunks, and the cowboys, who greatly feared midnight bites from the prowling animals, believing hydrophobia a sure consequence,

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usually preferred to sleep inside the houses, on bunks filled with alfalfa hay. If they ventured to sleep out-of-doors, they kept small cans of coal oil ready and, whenever a wakeful man saw one of the small creatures near, a quick turn of the wrist drenched its fur with the fluid and a brand from the smouldering campfire tossed after it sent a squealing pillar of flame flying up the hill and saved them from further disturbance that night.

A board nailed across a corner of the largest house served Conrad as a desk. He kept there a lamp, writing materials, and a few books. While the men sprawled around the campfire and the last gleams of dusky red faded from the west and the moon bounded up from behind the eastern hills, he made his memoranda, wrote a letter to be sent to the post-office by the first chance comer, and lost himself for an hour in a volume of Shakespeare. When he went outside the men were walking about, yawning and stretching, ready for sleep. Curtis's imagination was still astir from his reading, and the presence of any other human being seemed an impertinence. But he said, genially:

"Well, boys, you begin to look as if you wanted to turn in. Take whatever bunks you

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like, if you want to go inside. I 'm going to sleep out here."

"Better have a tin of ile handy," said Red Jack. "The polecats are sure likely to nibble your toes if you don't. The night I slept here last week I never saw the cusses so bad; durned if one of the critters did n't get inside and wake me up smellin' of my ear. I was some skeered of him stinkin' up the place so it could n't be slept in for a year, so I jest had to lay low and wait for him to go outside, and then I doused him good with ile and throwed the candle at him. I sure reckon he 's holed up somewhere now, waitin' till he can afford a new sealskin sacque before he shows hisself in good sassiety ag'in."

"I don't think they 'll bother me to-night," Curtis responded. At that moment he felt that nothing could disturb him, if only he could be left alone with the moonlight and the plain. "I 'll sleep with my boots on, and my cheeks are not as fat as yours, Jack, so there 'll be no temptation. Where do you want to bunk, José? You can sleep outside or in, just as you like."

Gonzalez replied respectfully that he would rather go in. But presently he came out again with his blanket and chose a spot against the

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wall of one of the houses. Conrad had gone out to the herd to speak with the man on patrol and to make sure that all was well. When he returned the men had disappeared. "Good!" he said to himself. "They 've all gone inside and I 've got the universe to myself." He did not see the still form in its gray blanket close against the wall.

Curtis took the red bandanna from his neck and tied it over his ears, to keep out the tiny things that crawl o' nights, and couched himself in his blanket on the gently rising ground with his saddle for a pillow. He lay down with his face to the east, where the dim and mellow sky, flooded with moonlight, seemed to recede far back, to the very limits of space, and leave the huge white globe suspended there in brooding majesty just above the plain. With long legs outstretched and muscles relaxed, he lay as still as if asleep, his eyes on its glowing disk. He knew all that science had discovered or guessed about the moon's character and history. But it had companioned him on so many a silent ride across long miles of dimly gleaming plain, and on so many nights like this as he lay upon the earth it had gathered his thoughts into its great white bosom, that he could not image

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it to himself as a mere dead and barren satellite of the earth. More easily could he understand how the living Cynthia had once leaped earthward and been welcomed with belief and love.

Conrad's mind busied itself at first with the play he had just been reading, but presently wandered to his own affairs and the purpose that had been the dominant influence of half his life. He chuckled softly as he remembered the check he had recently received. "I 've got him on the run," he thought, "and I 'm bound to lay him out sooner or later. Lord, but it will be a satisfaction to face him finally! And he 'll not get the drop on me first, either, unless Providence takes as good care of rascals as they say it does of fools." He recalled himself now and then to listen to the sounds from the sleeping herd, to the hoof-beats of the horse as the cowboy on watch rode round and round the bunch, and to his voice singing in a lulling monotone. But gradually thought and will and sense sank back toward the verge of that great gulf out of which they spring.

When next he opened his eyes the moon was dropping toward the western horizon, but he had turned in his sleep and its light

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was still upon his face. Lying motionless, Curtis listened to the sounds from the herd, his first thought being that something unusual there must have awakened him. The coyotes were yelping at one another from hill and plain, but through their barking he could hear the snorting sigh of a steer turning in its sleep, the tramp of the horse, and the cowboy's lullaby. He recognized the voice as that of Peters, who was to have the third watch, and so knew that it must be well on toward morning. He was about to sink into slumber again when his gaze fell upon a small black and white animal nosing among some rocks near by. "Poor little devil! If it wakens any of the boys it will get a taste of hell out of proportion to its sins," he thought, and decided that he would drive it away before any one else discovered it. But the languor of sleep still held him and not a muscle moved as his eyelids began to droop. Then, through his half-shut eyes, he became conscious that something was moving, over against one of the houses, among the shadows. His eyelids lifted again and he saw the Mexican rise out of his blanket, look about, and in a crouching posture move stealthily toward him. Something in his hand glittered in the moonlight.

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"It 's José," thought Conrad. "He 's coming for the skunk with a can of oil. Quick, or I 'll be too late!" He sprang to a sitting posture and flung out one arm. As he did so he noticed with sleepy surprise that José was not facing toward the animal but was coming toward him. Then, before he had time to speak, the Mexican turned, a flying something shone in the moonlight like an electric flash, and Conrad's eyes, following the gleam, saw the little creature pinned to the ground with a long knife through its neck and the gray sand darkening with its blood.

"Why, José, that was a wonderful throw!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, señor," the man replied quietly, as he stooped to draw out the knife and wipe it on the sand, "I am rather good at that sort of thing."

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CHAPTER X

BY A HAIR'S BREADTH

CURTIS CONRAD rode to the farther side of a hill sloping gently northeast of the houses as the outfit was getting under way the next morning. He remembered having seen there a rather uncommon species of cactus, and he thought to make sure of it in order to secure a specimen for Lucy Bancroft's collection when next he should pass that way on a homeward trip. José Gonzalez noted his action and presently, when a steer broke wildly from the herd and ran back, it was José who dashed after it. But, instead of heading it off and driving it back, he so manœuvred that he contrived to get it around the hill behind which he had seen Conrad disappear. The superintendent was digging busily in the ground with his pocket-knife, having decided to take up the plant and leave it in the house in readiness for his return journey.

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Assured that the rest of the outfit was out of sight beyond the hill, Gonzalez left the steer to its own devices and galloped straight toward and behind the kneeling figure, his long knife drawn but concealed against his leg. Conrad's attention was engrossed in what he was doing and his thoughts were all of Lucy Bancroft, of how pleased she would be to get this rare specimen, and of how necessary it would be for him to help her plant it. José checked his horse into a walk and leaned forward, his eyes fastened on the other's back, his knife lying half hidden in his palm. On the soft ground the hoof-beats of the horse made little sound and their faint, unresounding thud was masked by the noises from the moving herd.

Gonzalez drew rein within a few yards of his object and lifted his arm, with the knife balanced in his hand. At that instant the steer bellowed, and Curtis leaped to his feet, on the alert at once lest something had gone wrong with the herd. He saw the single steer and, wheeling around to look for others, his glance took in the Mexican, swerving his horse down the hill and deftly returning the knife to his belt. "Are you after the steer, José?" he called. "Is that the only one loose?"

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"Yes, señor. The rest are all right. This one has given me a chase, but I 'll have him back right away."

"Stop a minute, José. Would you mind letting me use your knife? Mine 's too short and I have n't anything else."

Gonzalez rode up, dismounted, and held out the knife with a courteous smile. As he stood back with one leg forward, arms folded, and head held high, Curtis thought him an image of dashing, picturesque, masculine comeliness. "José," he said, "how did you get such skill in throwing the knife? I never saw anybody do the trick better than you did it last night. I should n't like to have you," and he smiled as he returned the weapon, "aim this thing at me as you did at that polecat."

An answering smile flashed over José's dark face, lighting up his eyes and showing a row of white teeth beneath his moustache. "I have practised it much, señor. It is not easy."

The next day, Conrad, Gonzalez, and several others were getting together some cattle in the foothills when three of the largest steers broke away and raced wildly back toward their grazing grounds. The superintendent

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called the Mexican to help him, and told the others to take the remainder of the cattle, with all they might find on the way, back to the day herd.

Two gallant figures they made as they galloped across the plain, the wind blowing up the wide brims of their hats, the grace and freedom of strength and skill in every movement of body and limb. Lariats were at their saddle horns, and Curtis carried a six-shooter in his belt, but Gonzalez had only his knife, thrust into his boot leg. They circled and headed off the steers, which eluded and dashed past them again and again, until presently Conrad noticed that the largest of the three acted as a sort of leader. "Rope him, José," he called, "and then we can manage the others."

As Gonzalez in response came galloping toward the animal from one side, Curtis rushed past it on the other to prevent it from getting away and giving another chase. He glanced at the loop that came whirring through the air and his heart gave a bound of vexation. "The fool greaser is throwing too far," he muttered. With an instinct of sudden peril he dug in his spurs and his horse made a quick, long leap. He whirled about

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in time to see the snakey noose fall on the spot whence they had jumped.

"What's the matter with you, José?" he shouted. "You nearly roped me instead of the steer! Try it again." Gonzalez coiled his rope and galloped after the steer and half an hour later the two men rode into the round-up, driving the panting and humbled animals.

One of the younger and less experienced men, Billy Black, generally known as "Billy Kid," happened to lame his horse and bruise himself that day, and was ordered to stay in camp to nurse his knee. At Rock Springs, where they made camp next day, a man who gave his name as Andy Miller rode up and asked for a job. He explained that he had been working on a little ranch over toward Randall but had got tired of the place and was pushing for the railroad. Hampered by Billy Black's accident, Conrad was glad of the opportunity and tested his skill with horse and rope.

"You 'll do," he said. "I 'm short of hands, and you can stay with us until we get to the railroad if you like."

The new man was stockily built, and looked strong and agile. Around the campfire that

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night he won his way at once into the good graces of the other men, cracking jokes, telling stories, and roaring out cowboy songs until bedtime. They were so hilarious that Conrad joined their circle, smoked his after-supper pipe with them, and laughed at Miller's jokes and yarns.

The Rock Springs watering-hole was in a hilly region, broken here and there by stony gulches. The outflow from the springs ran through a ravine which furrowed the hillside to its foot, turned abruptly westward, and widened out into a goodly pool, where the cattle waded and drank. The camp lay on the hillside above the springs, and the cattle were bunched over its brow on the other side.

Conrad wakened early and an inviting image came to him of that pool, lying still and clear in the dim gray light, untroubled by the miring hoofs of the cattle. No one else, except the Chinese cook, busy with his breakfast fire, seemed to be awake, and no one stirred as Curtis moved down the hill, past the springs, and over the rise beyond. But Gonzalez, motionless in his blanket, watched his departure. And presently, when the cook had disappeared in the chuck-wagon, José rose, cast a cautious glance over the sleeping camp,

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and followed Conrad, taking advantage of occasional boulders, clumps of mesquite, greasewood, and yucca to conceal his movements. At the springs he turned down the gulch, following its course to the basin of the drinking hole, where he hid behind a great boulder, barely ten feet from the bank where lay the other's clothing.

With wary eyes he watched while the superintendent waded out to the deepest part of the pool, ducked and splashed, swam a little, and presently returned to the shore. Through the brightening air the lean and sinewy body with its swelling muscles gleamed like rose-tinted marble below the tanned face and neck. Behind the boulder José crouched closer and drew the knife from his belt, while his body grew tense as he watched Conrad rub himself down and put on his clothes.

"Will he never keep still a second?" Gonzalez asked himself impatiently, as he poised his knife. Curtis sat down on a flat stone and reached for his shoes and stockings, whistling a gay little melody from the last comic opera he had heard in San Francisco.

A sound of shouting and the muffled noise of rushing cattle broke through the morning air, which had been as still and untroubled

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as the surface of the pool. Conrad, his music silenced and nerves alert, faced quickly toward the camp, turning his body from the waist upward and giving Gonzalez a fair three-quarters view of his torso.

The Mexican, ready and waiting, seized an instant of arrested motion, and sent the poised weapon straight for his heart. As it left José's hand, the stone on which Curtis sat, yielding to the twisting motion of his body, slipped under him, and he threw out his left arm to preserve his balance. He was aware of something bright cleaving the air, of a sudden pain in his arm, and a stinging point in his side. But before his brain could realize what had happened, he saw José Gonzalez leap from behind the boulder and rush toward him, befouling the air with a string of Spanish oaths.

Conrad sprang to his feet and wheeled, with right fist ready to meet the attack, before José could reach him. The Mexican flew at him with both arms outstretched, meaning to seize his throat and throttle him before he could comprehend his danger. Curtis saw the open guard and landed a blow on his chest which sent him staggering backward. But he returned at once, with left arm raised

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in defence and right hand ready to seize the other's shirt collar and choke him senseless.

For a moment only was Conrad at a disadvantage by reason of the suddenness of the assault. But with the knife still bedded in his bleeding and helpless left arm, his only weapon was his right fist, which he must use for both defence and attack. The Mexican's eyes were fired with the passion of combat, and the other, ignorant of why they were fighting, knew only, by his blanched face and set jaws, that his purpose was deadly.

Gonzalez, after that first blow upon his chest, was wary. He danced around Conrad, making feints and trying to get inside his guard. But Curtis, whose brain was working in lightning-like flashes, did not waste his strength pounding the air. He kept his assailant eluding his feints and jumping to escape pretended charges, thinking to wear him out in that way. He soon saw that he was the superior in boxing skill, as well as being both taller and heavier than his foe, and he began to feel assured of final victory, notwithstanding his useless hand and disabled arm.

José's effort was constantly toward Conrad's left side, and Curtis guessed that he was

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trying to get possession of the knife still sticking in his arm. He knew that if Gonzalez recovered that weapon his chance of life would be small indeed. His bare feet were bleeding from the sharp little stones on the bank of the pool, but he was conscious neither of that nor of pain in arm or side, though the blood from his wound was making a red streak down his shirt and trousers. But he continued to hear, with a kind of divided consciousness, the sound of shouts, the rushing of cattle, and the hoofs of galloping horses. In the back of his brain he knew that there had been a stampede of the herd, and with attention absorbed in his fight for life, the thought that he was needed at the camp spurred him on to more desperate effort.

José made a dash for his left side, but Curtis turned and with all his force sent a blow which caught the Mexican, intent on the knife, with shoulder unguarded. Gonzalez spun half round and reeled backward. Conrad had planted one foot on a rounding stone, and as he delivered the blow it slipped and sent him headlong. He was up again in an instant, barely in time to save himself from José's fingers, which clutched at his throat. But Gonzalez had got inside his guard and

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they gripped, the one with one arm and the other with two, for what each felt must be the final struggle. The American caught José's left arm between their two bodies and, reaching around him, grasped the other wrist in his right hand. They swayed back and forth, José exerting all the strength of his muscles to free his arms, while Conrad, gripping him close, used all the remnant of his strength to throw him down.

By this time the Mexican's eyes were gleaming with an ugly light and his olive cheeks were flushed with anger. Whatever the purpose that had moved him at first, Curtis saw that he was fighting now with the aboriginal rage of conflict, with the fierce hate born of the blows he had received. He kicked wildly at the superintendent's shins and accidentally planted the heel of his boot squarely upon the other's bare foot. Conrad's face twitched with the hurt, and with a snarling grin Gonzalez lifted the other for similar purpose, forgetting shrewd tactics of battle in the lust of giving pain to his opponent. But Curtis caught the momentary advantage of unstable balance and with a twist and a lunge they came down together, Conrad's left shoulder striking against a stone beside which

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the Mexican fell. Thrilling with the surety of triumph, his enemy pinned to the ground, Curtis was barely conscious of a snapping in his shoulder and a sharp pain in his collar bone. With one knee on Gonzalez's chest, he pulled the knife from his left arm, broke it across the boulder, and threw the blood-stained pieces far out into the pond. His assailant was at his mercy now and the heat and anger of combat ebbed from his veins as he looked down at the Mexican's unresisting figure.

"You have bested me this time, Don Curtis," said Gonzalez quietly.

"Get up, José," replied Conrad rising, and the two men, panting from their conflict, faced each other. José stood with his arms folded and head erect and looked at his employer with unafraid eyes, in which smouldered only the traces of his recent rage. Conrad surveyed him thoughtfully for a moment before he spoke.

"José, what did you do it for?"

The Mexican smiled but made no reply.

"Have you got anything against me?" Conrad persisted. "Do you think I've mistreated you or injured you in any way?"

"No, señor, I have nothing against you."

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"Then what — by God, are you one of Dell Baxter's thugs? Has he sent you down here to stick me in the back?" Impelled by the flash of sudden conviction, Conrad thrust his face close to the other's and glared into his eyes. Gonzalez stepped back a pace and looked gravely across the hill at the reddening sky. His composed face and closely shut lips showed that he did not intend to answer.

"Oh, all right!" Curtis exclaimed. "I don't expect you to peach on your pal. But I reckon I've sure struck the right trail this time. And look here, José! Was it me you were after when you stuck your knife in that skunk?"

The Mexican's eyes fell and his black brows met in a frown. He was thinking how much trouble this man had given him by springing up so unexpectedly that night. But for that it would all have been so easy and simple!

"'I reckon it was!" Conrad went on hotly. "And I reckon it was me instead of the steer you rode after the next morning, with your knife ready when I looked up. And I reckon it was me instead of the steer you tried to rope when you made that remarkable miss. I've been a fool to trust a damned greaser, even when he was in plain sight. But look

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here, José Gonzalez!" Conrad stopped and glared into the Mexican's sombre and inscrutable eyes. Holding his bleeding left arm in his right hand he leaned forward, head thrust out and eyes blazing.

"Just you look here, José Gonzalez!" he repeated. "I 'm onto your little game now, and if I can't be a match for any greaser that ever tried to stick a man in the back, I 'll deserve all I 'll get! Just come on and try it again whenever you like! Keep at work with the round-up if you want to — I 'm not going to give you your time for this. But I am going to write to Dell Baxter that I 'm onto his scheme and that the minute you make another crack at me there 'll be a bullet in your brain — and another in his as soon as I can get to Santa Fe to put it there, and that he 'd better call you off if he wants to save his own skin. But if you can get me without my catching on first you 're welcome, that 's all!"

The rush of running cattle swept across their preoccupied ears, and both men turned to see a dozen steers sweep past the other end of the pond and up the hill.

"Quick, José! Help me head them off and turn them into the pond!" Conrad exclaimed

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as he started off in his bare feet. His long strides covered the distance quickly, and with hoots and yells and waving arm he soon turned their course down the hillside toward the water. Gonzalez was close behind, and together they manœuvred the frightened beasts to the pond, where the animals forgot their panic, waded in quietly, and began to drink.

"José," said the superintendent, as he sat down at the water's edge and began to bathe his muddy, bleeding feet, "I shall not mention this affair to any one here. I 'll say that a steer horned me just now. I 've broken my collar bone, I think, and I 've got this cut in my arm, and I 'll have to go to Golden at once to get patched up. When I come back I want you to remember what I just told you about getting daylight through your skull if you try any of your tricks on me again. There comes Red Jack after these cattle. Go and help drive them back to camp."

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CHAPTER XI

BATTLING THE ELEMENTS

THE shadows of the little rolling hills still sprawled across the intervening valleys when Curtis Conrad started back at a gallop over the road which his outfit had been slowly traversing for four days. To his foreman, Hank Peters, he had said that he had been thrown and gored by a steer and must go to Golden to have his collar bone set, and ordered him to stay where he was, cutting out and branding, that day and night, and camp the day after at Five Cottonwoods, where he would rejoin them.

The men puzzled and gossiped about the accident to their employer. "I don't see how it was possible," said Peters, "for such a thing to happen to a man that 's got the boss's gumption about cow-brutes."

"None of 'em was on the prod when I got to the pond," Red Jack declared. "José, you was with him. Did you see the scrimmage?"

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"I did not see the boss when he was down," Gonzalez replied in his precise, slightly accented English. "I was at the spring and heard him yell and I ran down to the pond at once, for I thought he needed help. I stumbled and fell and sprained my shoulder — it hurts me yet — so that when I reached the pond he was on his feet again and trying to drive the cattle into the water. I helped him and then we went back to where his shoes were. That was where Jack saw us. His arm bled a good deal there."

"Somethin' happened," observed Hank Peters, "and if the boss says it was a steer on the prod, I sure reckon it was. But the thing that 's troublin' me most is what started them critters off. I did n't see or hear a blamed thing likely to set 'em goin'. Did any of you?"

"I did n't," Texas Bill spoke up; "but Andy was there first. Did you see what it was, Andy?"

Andy Miller, the new hand, stopped to draw several deep whiffs from his newly lighted pipe before he replied. "No; I could n't make out anything, and I was right at the edge of 'em, too. They jumped and

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started all at once, as crazy as I ever see a bunch of critters."

"Mebbe you skeered 'em some, they not bein' used to you," suggested Billy Kid.

Andy grinned. "Well, I sure ain't boastin' none about the beauty of my phiz, but no gal ain't told me yet that I was ugly enough to stampede a herd of cow-brutes," and the subject was dropped with the laugh that followed.

Conrad's mare, larger and of better breed than the cow ponies, put the ground rapidly under her feet throughout the early morning. Though never trained for range work and used only for riding, he always took her on the round-up, in readiness for emergencies. His habit of talking to himself, engendered by much solitary riding, was often varied by one-sided conversations with the mare, and whatever the subject which occupied his thoughts and found fragmentary utterance in speech, his sentences were interspersed with frequent remarks to Brown Betty. Apparently she found this custom as companionable as he did, for she was sure to protest at a long period of silence.

"So, ho, my pretty Brown B.," said Conrad gently, as he patted the mare's sleek neck, "that's the pace to give 'em!" A sharp

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twinge in his shoulder set his lips together, and an oath, having Congressman Baxter as its objective, came from between his teeth. "I 'll write that damned Baxter a letter," he broke out savagely, "that will singe his eyelashes when he reads it!"

His thoughts went back to the subject which so frequently occupied them — his lifelong, vengeful quest of the man who had despoiled his father, wrought destruction upon their home, and changed the current of his own life. His heart waxed hot as he recalled his interview with Rutherford Jenkins. Never for an instant had he doubted that Jenkins's statement was a deliberate lie. Smiling grimly, he stroked the mare's mane. "I was a fool, was n't I, Betty, to suppose I 'd get straight goods out of him. It cost me five hundred dollars to find out that he 's a skunk, — which I knew before. I deserved all I got, did n't I, Betty, for not having more gumption."

The frontiersman's caution, which grows almost instinctive in one who rides much alone over plain and mountain, sent his eyes now and again to search the long stretch of road that trailed its faint gray band across the hills behind and before him and to scan

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the sun-flooded reach from horizon to horizon. A red stain accentuated the meeting line of sky and plain in the west.

"Betty Brown, do you see that red mark yonder?" he said, gently pulling her ear. "That means a sand-storm, and we 've got to hike along at a pretty stiff pace while we can. What do you think about it, my lady?" The mare raised her head and gave a little snort. "Smell it, don't you?" he went on as he patted her approvingly. "Well, that 's where you 're smarter than I am, for I reckon I sha'n't be able to do that for another hour."

He fell silent again, thinking of the Delafield matter and Jenkins's assertion that Bancroft was Delafield. "He sure knows who Delafield is," was his conclusion, announced aloud, "but he 's not going to tell. He 's probably blackmailing the man, whoever he is, and he won't take any chances that would be likely to spoil his income. Well, that proves that Delafield is somebody in New Mexico rich enough and prominent enough to make it worth while for Jenkins to keep his knowledge to himself. I 've got that much for my five hundred, anyway. Lord, Betty, was n't I a tenderfoot!" and he swore under his breath, half angrily, half amusedly, as he

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turned again to study the road and the plain. The heat haze was rising, and the clear white sunlight was master of earth and sky. Far to one side he noted the silvery lake of a mirage. But the red line had mounted higher, and become a low, dirty-red wall that seemed to fence the western expanse from north to south. "It sure looks like a bad one, Betty, and I 'm afraid we shan't be able to get home to-night after all. But we 'll make Adobe Springs anyway, if it does n't catch us too soon."

The pain in his shoulder brought his mind back to the conviction that Baxter had instigated the assault upon him, and he began searching for the motive. Did the Congressman think his political opposition important enough to make his taking off desirable? Suddenly he slapped his thigh and broke out aloud: "Lord! what if Baxter should be Delafield! He sure ought to be if there 's anything in the eternal fitness of things. If he should be — ah-h," and he broke off with a hard, unmirthful laugh. Ransacking his memory for all he knew of Baxter's life he presently shook his head regretfully. "No; the facts are against it. There 's nothing in that lead. It 's a pity, though, for it would

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be a satisfaction — to say nothing of the public benefit — to knock 'em both off the roost at one pop." His mind busied itself with conjectures about Delafield's identity, as he considered first one and then another of the more prominent men in the Territory. He was silent so long that the mare tossed her head impatiently and whinnied. Curtis smiled and stroked her mane.

"Hello, old girl!" he said aloud, "getting lonesome, are you, and you want to be talked to. Oh, you 're spoiled, Betty B., that 's what you are. We 'll go up the hill and see Miss Bancroft, won't we, Betty, while we 're in Golden; and we 'll take that cactus to her, and help her plant it. And she 'll come out to the fence to see you, Betty; and she 'll give you a lump of sugar, and pat your nose, and look as sweet as a pink rose with brown velvet eyes. She 's a bully fine girl and we like her, don't we, Betty Brown? The way she sticks by her father is great; he could n't help being a first-class fellow, could he, B. B., with such a daughter as that?"

The red wall was rising in the sky, devouring its sunlit blue and spreading out into smoky-red, angry-looking clouds. A high wind, hot and dry, swept across the plain

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from the west. All the cattle within Conrad's range of vision had turned their heads to the east and, although they were still grazing, moved only in that direction. Seeing a herd of antelope headed the same way, Curtis took the red bandanna from his neck and waved it toward them. As the bright signal floated in the wind their leader turned, stared, and began to walk back, the whole herd following with raised heads and gaze fixed in fascinated interest. He flaunted the red square and they came steadily on, until presently the warning of danger in the hot wind and the odor of the approaching storm overcame the compulsion of curiosity, and they wheeled again, away from the threatened peril.

The small life of the plain was fleeing before the furnace-like breath of those red, surging clouds. Jackrabbits leaped across the road on fleet legs, and occasionally Conrad saw coyotes, singly or in packs, running eastward as for their lives. Fat carrion crows hurried their unwieldy flight and, higher in the air, a frequent lone hawk sailed out of the west, while now and then a road-runner cut across his path with hasting feet.

"It's going to be a bad one, I guess," Curtis muttered, jamming his soft hat down

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closer on his head. The mare seemed to be trying of her own accord to escape the storm, and her swinging lope was steadily leaving the miles behind. "Keep it up, Betty, keep it up," he said encouragingly. "I want to reach Adobe Springs and get this message to Baxter off my mind. My shoulder 's aching, old girl, but it ain't aching a bit more than I am to tell him what I think of him."

Soon the sand-storm was upon them, concealing the landscape and covering the sky with its clouds. Upon man and beast it beat as bitterly as a sand-blast. It pelted and stung Conrad's face and neck, and filled his eyes and ears and nostrils until he was forced now and again to pull his hat over his face for a moment's respite in which to draw a less choking breath. "It looks as if all Arizona had got up and dusted, and was hell-bent to get out of here," he jested grimly, as he bent over the mare's neck and encouraged her with voice and gentle stroke. "That shows good sense, Betty, though it 's mighty hard on us. Come right along, old girl; we must get to Adobe Springs."

As the air grew thicker there shone from the sky, instead of the vivid white sunshine of a few hours before, only a dim, diffused,

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"UPON MAN AND BEAST THE SAND-STORM BEAT BITTERLY"

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lurid light. Even to Curtis, sitting quartering in the saddle with his back twisted toward the wind, Brown Betty's ears were barely visible. For a while he allowed the mare to follow the road herself, until he found that her sense of duty must be supplemented by authority. For, under the discomfort of the belaboring wind and stinging sand, she began to yield to her instinct to turn tail and drift before the storm. Then he knew that he must keep a firm hand on the bridle, and his attention at the highest pitch, or they would soon be wandering helplessly over the plain. He walked long distances beside the mare, with his body shielding her head and with speech and caress keeping up her courage. Their progress was slow, for the force of the storm was so great that, though it beat against them from the side, they could struggle through it only at a walk.

Hour after hour went by, and the only sign of its passage was that a dim, yellowish centre of illumination, that had once been the sun, crept slowly across the sky. As the day grew older Conrad's pain from his injury became more acute. Most of the time he felt it only as an insistent background to the keen outward discomfort of stinging sand and

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pounding wind. But when an occasional sharper twinge brought it more vividly to his consciousness he swore a little between his teeth, and thought of the letter he was going to write to Dellmey Baxter. The particles of sand filled his hair and encrusted his face and neck until they were of a uniform brick-red. Constant effort and encouragement were necessary to keep Brown Betty in the road, and finally he was compelled to walk at her head most of the time and with a guiding hand on her bridle counteract the unflagging urge of her instinct to drift before the blast.

Thus they battled their way through the hot, beating wind and suffocating sand, while that vague core of light moved athwart the dirty heavens, dropped slowly down the western sky, and was swallowed up in the denser banks of dusk above the horizon. It had been too dark before for the discernment of objects, but a yellowish glare had filtered through the sand-laden air, lending a lurid, semi-translucence to the atmosphere. Now even that was gone, leaving a desert enveloped in pitchy darkness, while the wind roared about the ears of the travellers and pounded their bodies as with cudgels and the sand pelted their skins.

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Most of the time Curtis depended upon the feel of the road under his feet to maintain his direction, but now and then it was necessary for him to get down on his hands and knees in order to recover the track from which they had begun to stray. Once his fingers came in contact with a small feathered body. The bird tried to start up under his hand. He knew it must be disabled and placed it inside his shirt. Thus they plodded on through the night and the storm, the pain in his shoulder growing keener and the torture of the wind and sand ever more nerve-racking.

At last the mare raised her head and gave a long whinny. Conrad felt sure that she was announcing their near approach to the food and shelter within the adobe houses. "What is it, Betty? Do you know where we are?" he asked, and she rubbed her nose against his face, nickered, and pulled at the bridle with the evident desire to turn from the direction they were pursuing. Curtis knew they were in a little hollow, and thought it might be that into which the road dipped after leaving the houses.

"All right, Betty," he said. "I 'll follow your lead a little way, but be cautious, old girl, and don't tie up to any lying hunches."

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He slackened his hold on the bridle, and the mare started off eagerly. They climbed a hill, and presently Conrad was aware of a black mass before him. Putting out his hand he felt an adobe wall. The mare crowded close against it, and stopped. She had left the road, which took the hill at a long sloping angle from the foot of the rise, and had climbed straight up the steep incline. He felt his way around the corner, unfastened the door, and entered. An emphatic "Whew!" gave vent to his feeling of relief. The mare, close at his heels, snorted in response, and Curtis, smiling in the dark, threw his arm across her neck in fellowship and said, "Feels good, does n't it, Betty B., to get out of that hurricane from hell?"

By the light of a lantern he led the mare to the spring, stabling her afterward in one of the houses. "In the best society, Betty Brown," he explained, "it 's not considered good form for horses to sleep in men's houses. But you deserve the best I can give you to-night, blest if you don't, old girl, and you shall have it, too." He gathered together, for her food and her bed, the alfalfa hay from several of the bunks, and found for her also a small measure of oats. Then, having

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attended to her wants, he looked about for something to stay his own hunger.

It was his custom to keep some canned provisions in the place, as the station was much used by his men. On a little smouldering fire in one corner of the room, he made some tea in a tin can. A frying-pan hung against the wall, and in it, awkwardly fumbling with his one useful hand, he contrived to warm a stew of tinned *chile con carne* and pilot bread. Fine sand drifted in and settled in a red dust over the food as he ate, and he could feel its grit between his teeth.

The bird he had carried in his bosom he found to be a Southwestern tanager. Its pinkish-red plumage shone with a silvery radiance in the lamplight. One of its legs was broken, and one wing had been injured. "I 'll take it to Miss Bancroft," he said aloud, "and she 'll care for it till it can shift for itself again, poor little devil!"

With intense satisfaction Conrad at last sat down to the letter in which he had all day been longing to express his feelings. "I wonder," he thought, "if Dellmey Baxter did it because he don't like the things I say about him. Well, he 'll have to get used to it, then,

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for I 'm not going to quit." There was a grim smile on his face as he wrote:

"I consider it the square thing to tell you that I am onto the game of your man, José Gonzalez. We had our first set-to this morning, in which he winged me, but I got the best of him. I could have killed him if I had wanted to, but he is such a good cowboy I hated to do him up. I am going to keep him in my employ, but I want you to understand, distinctly, that if he makes another crack at me I shall go to Santa Fe as quick as I can get there and make a Christmas gift of you to the devil before you know what 's happening.

"Yours truly,

"CURTIS CONRAD.

"P. S. I am still shouting for Johnny Martinez for Congress. C. C."

"There!" he exclaimed, as he sealed the envelope and threw it down contemptuously; "I sure reckon he won't be so anxious for me to turn up my toes with my boots on after he reads that."

The pain in Conrad's arm and shoulder had become so keen that he could not sleep. He lay in his bunk listening to the rattling of the door and the rage of the wind against the house, seeking to keep his mind from the stabbing pain long enough to sink into

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unconsciousness. But no sooner did his eyelids begin to close down heavily than a fresh throb made him start up again wide awake. This irritated him more than did the other suffering, and finally he jumped up angrily, found a copy of Lecky's "History of European Morals," and, with the muttered comment, "This is about what I need to-night," settled himself on an empty cracker box and read the night away. Toward morning he became aware that the wind was abating, and a little later that less sand was drifting into his retreat.

Breakfast was eaten and Brown Betty cared for by lamplight and with the first dim rays of morning he set out once more upon the road. The bird was again in his bosom, and the cactus, wrapped in old newspapers, rested at the back of his saddle. The storm had passed, but the air was still full of dust particles through which the sun shone, red and smoky. Curtis knew that these would settle gradually with the passing hours and the sky become as clear as usual. Already he could see the road for several rods in front of him, and that was all he needed to keep it flying under Brown Betty's feet.

At the ranch house Mrs. Peters told him

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that a man had been there looking for work and described his appearance. "Yes; he overtook us at Rock Springs, and I hired him," Conrad said. Then, remembering the account Andy Miller had given of his previous situation, he asked her if the man had said where he came from.

"No," she replied; "he did n't say where he 'd been working; but he came from toward Golden."

The superintendent thought the discrepancy rather curious, but decided it was nothing more than a not unusual cowboy eccentricity of statement. He resumed his journey with no misgivings, and mid-afternoon found him arguing with the physician at Golden that he might just as well start back to the round-up that same night.

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CHAPTER XII

THE FIRST SHOT

ALEXANDER BANCROFT sat in his private room with Curtis Conrad's return checks before him. They were not many: one in favor of his brother at the University of Michigan, one for a mail order house in Chicago, a small one to a New York publishing concern, — and his eyes fell upon the name of Rutherford Jenkins and the amount, — five hundred dollars. He stared at the slip of paper for a moment, conviction rushing to his mind that his pursuer knew the truth; then he took his revolver from his pocket and examined its chambers. "I may have to do him up myself!" he thought, his lips tightening. But sudden hesitation gripped his heart. Until within a few weeks he had considered Curtis one of his best friends, had liked the young cattleman whole-heartedly, admiring and enjoying his impulsiveness, his geniality, his ardent loyalty to his friends, and his equally ardent hostility to those he disliked.

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Now the good-fellowship he had been accustomed to feel stopped his hand. "Can it be possible," he asked himself for the hundredth time, "that this eager-hearted, companionable fellow will really carry out his deadly purpose?" He recalled the intensity with which Conrad had spoken of his long quest for revenge, his vehemence toward his enemies, his impetuosity. Again conviction grew strong upon him that, when the man knew, the end would come. The frontier code by which he had lived so long nerved his heart, and he muttered, "He shan't smash things — now! I'll smash him before I'll let him do that!"

He swung the revolver into position and took sight. As his eye glanced down the barrel he saw that it was pointing at Lucy's pictured face, smiling down from the top of his desk; his hand shook as he laid down the weapon. There was a knock at the door, and he made sudden pretence of close attention to the papers before him. The door partly opened and he heard Conrad's voice outside. Surety of imminent peril seized Bancroft's mind. The instinct of self-defence sent his hand to his revolver, and he sprang up, pulling the trigger. Curtis rushed in at the report, calling out, "What's the matter, Aleck?"

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The banker had just time to stay his finger at sight of the friendly face and solicitous manner.

"I did n't hurt you, did I, Curt?" he asked anxiously, sinking back in his chair and looking at Conrad's arm, helpless in a sling. The bullet, they found, had nicked the top of the door and buried itself in the ceiling. "I was looking my revolver over when you knocked," Bancroft explained, "and had just been aiming at that spot on the wall. My finger must have pulled the trigger unconsciously. The thing 's set to a hair, anyway. I must have it fixed. What 's the matter with your arm, Curt?"

In the revulsion of feeling that swept over him as he realized that the cattleman was as friendly as ever and that therefore his secret was still safe, he felt genuinely thankful that his bullet had gone wild.

Conrad told of his fight with José Gonzalez. "You 're getting the truth about it, Aleck," he went on; "but to everybody else I 'm saying that I got horned by a steer, knocked over, and my collar bone cracked. I 'm convinced it 's some of Dell Baxter's work. I reckon I 've been saying out loud just what he is too often to please him. But the letter I 've sent

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him will buffalo him quick enough. José's a good cowboy, and I'm going to keep him. But I don't want the boys to know anything about our little scrap. So I'm saying it was a steer on the prod that did it."

Bancroft's thoughts were active as he lighted his cigar. That check — it must have been Castleton money, to be handled for Johnny Martinez. Perhaps security might still be compassed without bloodshed. In thankfulness that he had not killed the man who was still his friend he revolted against the purpose of the Mexican, to which he knew in his soul he had given tacit consent. He did not want this cordial, confiding, good fellow struck down — if his own safety could be otherwise secured.

"You'd better give the Mexican his time, Curt. He's locoed probably; when you get back you may find he's killed half your men."

"Well, if he tries running a-muck in that gang," the superintendent responded cheerfully, "he'll never do anybody else any harm. Anyway, I've settled him for the present; I busted his knife and threw the pieces into the pond. No; he's in Dell's pay; that's all there is to it; and when Dell reads my letter

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he 'll hike to call his man off. I don't expect any more trouble from José."

Bancroft made no reply and Conrad went on: "By the way, Aleck, for a full minute yesterday I thought Baxter must be my man — the man I 'm after, you know — Delafield. I 've found out that he 's somebody rich and respectable here in New Mexico, and when I felt that Baxter must be responsible for this attack on me, I lit on him for my meat. But it was too good to be true; as soon as I thought it over I saw that Baxter could n't be Delafield. But they 're two of a kind all right. Both of 'em have got their freight loaded ready to pull out for hell at the drop of a hat. Baxter will have to pull his in less than three jumps of a bucking horse if he does n't call off his man. And Delafield will be pulling his mighty soon anyway."

Bancroft made a gesture of annoyance. "Curt, you talk too easily about killing. You 'd make a stranger think you 're a bad man of the border, instead of the decent citizen you are. For Heaven's sake, man, why don't you come to your senses, and see what an ass you 'll be making of yourself if you try to carry out this fool scheme of revenge that 's got hold of you? Why don't you accept his

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offer to pay back the money as fast as he can? Let him make restitution, and keep a whole skin; perhaps you 'll save your own scalp in the bargain."

The seeker after vengeance laughed blithely.

"Aleck, you 've no idea what this thing means to me. Why, man, you talk as if giving up that plan would be no more than changing my coat! You don't know, Aleck — why, to get the drop on Delafield and hold him while I tell him what he is in language that will scald him from head to foot, and then deal out to him the death he deserves — that 's the one thing I 've lived for all these fifteen years! I 'm obliged to you for your advice, Aleck; but I know what I 'm about."

Bancroft shrank away a little as Curtis talked. His lips tightened as he picked up the revolver and sighted it at a calendar on the wall. After a moment's silence he looked the other full in the eye and said, impressively:

"You forget one thing, Curt. If this man Delafield knows what you are doing — and you seem to feel sure he does — he 'll be prepared for your attack, and you 're not likely to have things your own way. Unless he 's a fool or a coward he 'll defend himself, even

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if he has to kill you doing it. And if he has any *sabe* at all he 'll be loaded for you when you get there, and have the drop on you before you can say a word."

"Chances of war," Conrad replied serenely. "He 's welcome to all he can get. But I 'm betting my last dollar, and my scalp in the bargain, that he can't draw as quick as I can, nor shoot as straight. You bet your life, Aleck, when that circus comes off I 'll be the star performer."

"Well," said Bancroft slowly, "if you won't listen to reason I suppose you 'll have to go on, hell-bent, in the gait you 've struck — and take the consequences. But you 're a fool to do it, and I hate to see you making such a blind ass of yourself."

Curtis laughed, undisturbed. "That 's all right, Aleck. I don't expect you to get the joy out of this business that I shall."

He went over to Bancroft's desk and picked up the revolver, examining its sights. "They 're not right, Aleck," he said. "When I get the use of my arm again I 'll fix them for you. And you don't use your gun right when you want to take quick aim: you don't swing it up quickly and steadily, as if you were used to it. You ought to practise, Aleck.

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Out here a man never knows when he may have to defend himself. I 've got to stay here several days, the doctor says; and while I 'm here I 'll show you a few tricks."

"All right, if you like," Bancroft replied, adding, as he pocketed his revolver, "I 'm not a very good shot and, as you say, out here a man never knows when he may have to defend himself."

Conrad, turning to go, lingered awkwardly. "By the way, Aleck," he blurted out, "it has occurred to me that perhaps you are getting tied up with Dell Baxter too tight for comfort. I don't want to seem curious about your affairs, you know, and I have n't got any big pile — you know what my balance is; but whatever I have got you 're welcome to, any time, if you want to cut loose from Baxter and it will help any."

Bancroft hid a grim smile behind the hand at his moustache as he thought of sundry checks of his own making their way toward Conrad's balance. "Thank you, Curt; it 's very kind and thoughtful of you to make the offer, and I appreciate it. But I don't need anything. Baxter and I are in partnership in a number of enterprises, but it 's all straight sailing."

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"That 's good, and I 'm glad to hear it. I was afraid he 'd got you under his thumb. But remember, Aleck, that my small pile is at your disposal any time it will be of use to you."

As the young man left the bank he saw Lucy Bancroft turn the corner toward the Mexican quarter and was quickly at her side, relieving her of the little bundle she carried. She was going to Señora Melgares, she explained, who could wash laces and embroideries and all kinds of dainty things beautifully with *amole* root. She was taking her some of Miss Dent's and her own fineries, and hoped to get her a great deal of work from others. "The poor thing!" said Lucy earnestly, her eyes wide and soft with sympathy. "She is so heartbroken over the affair! You 've heard? Mr. Gaines died the other day, and Melgares has been indicted for murder. My father says he 'll surely be found guilty and will probably be hanged. The poor señora!"

When they reached the little adobe house Lucy asked Curtis to go in with her, saying, "I 'm not very sure of my Spanish, and I 'd be glad to have you come in and help me out." They found Señora Melgares sitting

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with her head buried in her arms, her hair dishevelled, and her face, when she raised it, eloquent of grief and despair. But she greeted them with grave and gracious courtesy. Lucy impulsively took her hand and held it in both her own while she presented Señor Conrad. At the name the woman drew her slight figure together with a convulsive movement, her dark face lighting with interest.

"Don Curtis? Señor Don Curtis Conrad?" she asked eagerly.

"The same, señora," he answered in Spanish, bowing gravely.

"The same whose mare—?" she began, her expressive countenance finishing the query. Conrad bowed again. The woman sank down in her chair, her face in her hands, swaying back and forth as she moaned and sobbed. Lucy knelt by her side to comfort her, while Curtis bent over the girlish figure and spoke in a low, changed tone that the girl barely recognized, so different was it from his usual brisk utterance. It set her nerves vibrating in quick, half-conscious conviction of a depth and quality of feeling in harmony with her own.

"I am afraid I made a mistake by coming in, Miss Bancroft," he said. "It did not occur

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to me that she would connect me with her husband's trouble. Won't you please tell her, when she is quieter, that I am very sorry about the whole affair, that I have no feeling against him, and that I 'll gladly do for him whatever I can. I think I 'd better go now, but I 'll wait outside for you, and if I can be of any use you must call me."

When Lucy joined him a little later her face showed signs of tears, and as they walked back she was preoccupied and perturbed. She wished to see her father, so Curtis left her at the door of the bank.

"Daddy!" Lucy exclaimed as she rushed to his side, her eyes shining and her face aglow. "Oh, daddy, Señora Melgares has just told me the strangest thing! Mr. Conrad was with me, but he went out because she cried so, and he did n't hear what she said. I tried to quiet and comfort her, and finally she told me that her husband had been persuaded and paid to steal Mr. Conrad's horse by a man who said he wanted to get even with him for something. She told me his name — you and Mr. Tillinghurst and Judge Banks were talking about him the other day — Mr. Jenkins — Don Rutherford Jenkins, she called him."

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Anticipation warmed Bancroft's heart as she spoke. If the story was true it might give him just the hold on Jenkins that he wanted. He made her repeat the details of her conversation with the Mexican woman. "Did you say anything about it to Conrad?" he asked in conclusion.

"No, daddy; I thought I ought to tell you about it first."

"Quite right, Lucy. You were very prudent. And don't mention it now, to him or to anybody."

"No, of course not. But, daddy, won't that make it better for poor José Maria? Mr. Jenkins is the one that ought to be punished — he and Mr. Baxter; and poor ignorant Melgares ought to be let off very easily. Don't you think so, daddy?"

One of her hands rested on his shoulder. He took the other in both of his as he smiled at her indulgently. Her news had so heartened him that he hardly noticed her connection of Baxter with the affair. "I don't know about that, daughter. It is n't likely to have any effect, because his indictment is for murder — you know he killed Gaines while resisting arrest — and his motive in stealing the horse has no connection with that crime.

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I 'm glad you told me about it, dear. I 'll talk with Melgares myself, and see what can be done. I suppose his wife must be having a hard time. You might give her some money. And ask her," he said as he handed Lucy some bills, "not to speak about this Jenkins matter to any one else. Be sure you impress that upon her. It 's a pretty bad case, but you can tell his wife that everything possible will be done for him. Dell Baxter is coming down to undertake his defence; he does it for nothing. So you must n't think so badly of him hereafter, when you see how willing he is to make what amends he can to the poor fellow."

Lucy threw her arms about his neck and kissed his forehead. "Daddy, you 're awfully good and kind — the best man in the world! About Mr. Baxter, though — " she paused to toss her head, and a little sparkle shone in her eyes — "well, I 'm glad he has the decency to do it, but it 's no more than he ought; and before I think much better of him I 'll wait to see if he drives any more of the poor Mexicans out of their homes."

Bancroft began to plan hopefully. He would see Melgares and get the exact facts. If this story was true it would be just the

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sword he needed to hang over Jenkins. Evidently he had told Conrad nothing; therefore that check must have been campaign money from Ned Castleton to be used for the benefit of Martinez. Jenkins would not be likely to talk: it would ruin his chance of making money out of it himself. As for Curtis — perhaps, after all, he would not be unreasonable about the offer to make restitution. Another check would reach him soon, with assurance of more to follow speedily. Surely the man was too sensible to cast aside such a start in life as this money would give him, just to carry out a crazy notion that would end in his own ruin.

"But if he will go on, he 'll have nobody but himself to blame for whatever happens," he thought. "I 've given him fair warning."

The encouragement he felt turned his thoughts toward Louise Dent. In the intimacy of their daily life since she had been Lucy's visitor he had found her ever more lovable. He began to think, as he looked into her eyes and felt the restrained sweetness of her manner, that when he should be free to speak she would welcome his feeling, and have for it an intoxicating return. But he could say

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nothing until the settlement of this affair left no further danger of discovery and disgrace.

"She must not know — neither she nor Lucy shall know — never — never a word or hint," he thought desperately. True, Louise was not so unsparing in her moral judgments as Lucy; she was older, and, with more knowledge of the world, had more tolerance for the conditions under which men lived and worked. But if all that past, the past that he had believed buried beyond resurrection, should suddenly confront him, she and Lucy would be horrified. They would despise him. The respect, honor, and love for which he hungered would die; if they stayed beside him it would only be for compassion's sake. In the fierce mood that possessed him as he thought of going down again into dishonor he was ready to strike out at anybody's pity. This thing must not be. He had won his way back to position, power, affluence; he held the love and honor of his daughter and of the woman he hoped to make his wife; what he had won he would keep. His lips whitened as he struck the desk with his clenched fist.

"The past is dead, and it 's got to stay dead," he muttered. "I 'll win out yet, by God!"

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CHAPTER XIII

THE SECOND SHOT

FOUR days later the physician gave Conrad dubious permission to return to the round-up. "Well, I may as well say you can go," he surrendered, "since you are determined to go anyway. But don't blame me if your wounds get worse."

Most of this time the cattleman spent at the Bancrofts', where Lucy and Miss Dent tried to make an invalid of him, and all three enjoyed the comradeship that straightway sprang up among them. Between Lucy and Curtis there was much bantering gayety, but when alone their talk was sure to flow into serious channels. They had many long conversations, wherein each was deeply interested in everything the other said. They had much music also, Miss Dent playing and the others singing duets. Lucy was very happy. She beamed and sparkled, with glowing eyes and dimpling smiles, and her manner, the whole being of her, expanded into maturer

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womanliness. Between Miss Dent and Conrad there was from the first a mutual liking, which quickly developed into confidential friendship. On his last day in town, while helping Lucy water the plants in her conservatory, he spoke to her admiringly of Miss Dent.

"I 'm so glad you like my Dearie!" she responded warmly, looking up at him with a glow of pleasure. "She 's the dearest, sweetest woman! And you always feel you can depend on her. If you put your hand out you always know just where you can find Louise Dent, and you know she 'll be as firm as a rock. She 's been so good to me! And she 's always so restful and calm — she has so much poise. But, do you know —" she hesitated as she stopped in front of the cage that held the tanager Curtis had brought for her care. His physician had splinted its broken leg and bound its injured wing, and together they were anxiously watching its recovery. "It 's been eating, Mr. Conrad!" she broke off joyously. "Let 's give it more seeds and fresh water!" As they ministered to the bird's needs Curtis went on about Miss Dent.

"Yes; she seems to have a calm sort of

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nature, but when I look at her I find myself wondering if that is because she has never been moved very deeply, or because she keeps things hidden deep down. Her eyes are set rather close together, which generally means, you know, an ability to get on the prod if necessary; and sometimes there is a look in them that makes you feel as if she might break out into something unexpected."

Lucy was looking up at him with the keenest interest in her face. The southwestern sun had kissed her skin into rich browns and reds, and she carried gracefully her slender girlish figure. Her head, with its covering of short brown curls, always held alertly, gave to her aspect a savor of piquant charm. Curtis looked down into her upturned face and eager eyes with admiration in his own. Under her absorption in the subject of their talk she felt herself thrill with sweet, vague happiness.

"Do you know, I 've been feeling that very same thing about Dearie," she said in confidential tones. "She seems more restless lately, although I know she 's perfectly happy here with us. She has just the same quiet, gentle manner, but it seems as if there might be a volcano under it — not really, you know, but as if there might be if — if — I don't

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quite know how to say it— if things just got ready for it to be a volcano!"

"Do you think anybody would know it," asked Conrad, "even if it was really there?"

"I know what you mean — yes, she has wonderful self-control — I never saw anybody who could hide her feelings as she can, and always does. I 've been thinking lately that if Dearie were in love —" Lucy hesitated a moment while a deeper glow stained her cheek — "she 's just the sort of woman to do anything, anything at all, for the sake of it."

"Yes; and not get excited over it, either," added Curtis.

When Lucy went to attend to some household duties, Conrad sauntered out to the veranda, where he found Miss Dent with her sewing. He happened to refer to his boyhood; and she asked some questions that led him to speak of his youthful struggles. She was interested, and wanted to know the cause of his father's financial ruin. He hesitated before replying, the matter touched so nearly the secret core of his life and thought. Few, even among his intimates, knew anything about the vengeful purpose that had motived half his life, and he disliked ordinarily to

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say anything about the cause of his early misfortunes. But the habit of close and friendly speech into which he and Louise had fallen, coupled perhaps with a softening of feeling toward her sex that had been going on within him, moved him to openness. "It won't matter," he thought. "She 's such a level-headed woman; and I 've told Aleck already."

"I don't often speak about it," he said, "but I don't mind telling you, for you are such a good friend of the Bancrofts, and Aleck knows the story. Of course, you 'll understand that I don't care to have it discussed generally. My father's disasters all came from his getting caught in a specious financial scheme engineered by one Sumner L. Delafield of Boston."

An indrawn breath, sharp and sudden, made him look quickly at his companion. "Have you hurt yourself?" he asked solicitously.

"Oh, I jabbed my needle under my thumb nail. Such an awkward thing to do! It gave me a little shock, that 's all. Go on, please. What sort of a scheme was it?"

He told her briefly the story of his father's ruin and death, and outlined the transactions that led to Delafield's failure. As he spoke his heart waxed hot against the man who had

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caused the tragedy, as it always did when he thought long upon the subject, and he went on impulsively to tell her of his long-cherished purpose of revenge. She listened with drooped eyelids, and when she spoke, at his first pause, there was a slight quaver in her voice.

"You don't mean that you really intend to kill the man?"

"I do, that very thing. What's more, it's my notion that killing is too gentle for his deserts. For, of course, my case is only one out of many. And any man who would deliberately bring ruin and death into so many households — don't you think yourself he's worse than any murderer?"

She forced herself to raise her eyes and, once she had met his gaze, her own was cool and steady. But if Curtis had not been so absorbed in their discussion he might have seen that her face was paler than usual and her manner nervous, as she replied earnestly:

"But you forget, Mr. Conrad, that the man had no intention of doing these things, and that probably he involved himself in as much financial disaster as he did others. I've heard of the case before; I knew some people once who — were concerned in it — who lost money

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by it — and I 've always understood that the failure was due more to Delafield's sanguine temperament and over-confidence in his plans than to any deliberate wrong-doing. Don't you think, Mr. Conrad, that killing is a rather severe punishment for mistakes of judgment?"

He answered with the rapid speech and quick gestures he was wont to use when under the stress of strong feeling. "I can't take that lenient view of the case, Miss Dent. My conviction is that he got some money out of the affair, though not as much as he is generally supposed to have taken, and ran away with it. I 've studied the case pretty thoroughly, and I 've trailed him along from one place to another for years. I 'm hot on his tracks now; and he knows it. I 've followed him into New Mexico, and I know he 's somebody in this Territory, prosperous and respectable. He can't escape me much longer."

She had been thinking intently as she studied the expression of his face. "It 's not worth while to try argument or persuasion with him; opposition would only make him obstinate," was her conclusion. Her manner was as composed as usual, and only her eyes showed a trace of anxiety as she spoke,

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slowly and thoughtfully, her gaze searching his countenance:

"Well, if you say you are going to take revenge upon him in this savage way I suppose you will do it — if that chin of yours means anything. You have n't asked my opinion, but I 'm going to tell you anyway that it seems to me unwise and unjust and most unworthy of you to allow such an idea to become the obsession that this one has. But I want to know how you managed to keep your family together. That was a wonderful thing for a boy of fifteen to do."

"Oh, I don't deserve so much credit for it. Of course, I could n't have done it without help. Our guardian wanted to distribute us children around among the relatives; but I would n't have it that way, and begged so hard that at last he gave in. Two of my father's cousins lent money enough to pay off the mortgage on our home, on our guardian's representation that he should be able to save enough out of the wreck to pay it back in time. He did so; and we children kept a roof over our heads.

"A cousin of my mother's, a widow without children, offered to live with us and keep house. We rented part of the place and lived

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in close quarters in what was left. I worked like a Turk at anything and everything that brought in a penny; and so, all together, we had enough to eat and wear, and I was able to keep the girls and Homer in school. I went to night school and sat up reading anything I could get my hands on when I ought to have been in bed. It was hard sledding sometimes, but we pulled through. And I had good friends who saw that I was never out of a job of some sort.

"After a while our cousin married again and left us; but by that time my sisters were old enough to take charge of the housekeeping, and we got on very well. Ten years ago they both married, and I said to Homer: 'Let 's sell the house and give the money to the girls; you and I can shift for ourselves, and we don't want them to go to their husbands with nothing at all.' The kid was game, and so we sold the place and divided the money between Helen and Jeannette. Then I put Homer in school and struck out for myself. I 've sent him to college, and he 'll be graduated next year. But he 's worked right along, and helped himself a heap. There 's sure good stuff in the lad.

"This Summer I 'm not going to let him

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work; the rest of the way is clear enough now, and I want him to come down here with me, and learn to rope a steer and bust a bronco and go camping, and have a good out-doors time of it for his last college vacation."

As she listened with her eyes fixed upon his face, Miss Dent's attention had been half upon his story and half upon the man behind it, searching out his character through his words. The conviction settled in her mind that his vengeful intention was rooted deep, and that the more he talked of it the more set would he become in his purpose.

"I like your story," she said. "It is one of those tales of human effort that make one have more faith in human nature. But the climax you intend to put upon it is — horrible!" He noticed the slight movement of repulsion with which she spoke the word. "But that 's your affair," she went on. "Did I understand you — did you say —" In spite of her self-control she was stumbling over the question. She masked her momentary confusion with an absorbed interest in getting her sewing together. "Did you say that Mr. Bancroft knows — that you have told him this story?"

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"Yes; I told him the outlines of it a little while ago, apropos of a check I had from Delafield. The rascal thinks he can buy me off that way. That shows he's buffaloed. But he'll find out I'm not that sort."

"No; I should n't think you were. But Lucy — does she know anything about it?"

He looked up in surprise. "Why, no; of course not."

Bancroft was coming through the gate, bringing Judge Banks with him; and Lucy joined them a moment later. The talk turned on the coming trial of José Maria Melgares, the narrow escape of Pendleton from Melgares' bullet, and the death of Gaines as the result of his own foolhardy horse-play. They spoke of Little Jack Wilder's skill with the revolver, and Conrad reminded Bancroft of their agreement to do some target practice together.

"Let's all go out in the back yard now," Lucy exclaimed, "and Miss Dent and I will shoot too! Would n't you like it, Dearie? Come on! it will be such fun!"

While they were setting up the target Sheriff Tillinghurst came to speak to Judge Banks upon an official matter; and Lucy asked him to stay and help her shoot.

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"You-all use my gun, Miss Lucy, and then you 'll be sure to have good luck," he replied, drawing his revolver from his pocket. It was a small pearl-handled six-shooter, which the ladies admired, and the men jibed at for its daintiness.

"That 's all right," he answered good-naturedly. "This gun don't stack up much beside a cannon for size, but I can pervade and pester with it a right smart heap if I want to. It 's a peach of a shooter, and it don't show in my clothes. I never have anything on me but that, and I 've never seen the gun play yet where I got the worst of it. You-all try it, Miss Lucy."

Lucy took the revolver, telling him that now she would be his deputy, and, with plentiful instruction from Curtis, placed herself in position and fired. She hit the bull's-eye and won much applause, until she explained that she had fired with both eyes shut and that, if she had made a good shot, it was because she could n't help it with such a splendid gun as Mr. Tillinghurst's. Miss Dent took careful aim and, without lowering her arm, emptied the remaining chambers, making an excellent score. She, too, won a round of applause, to which she replied calmly, "Oh,

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I 've known how to shoot for years, and when I am in practice I do fairly well."

"You two fellows shoot a match," said Tillinghurst to Bancroft and Conrad. "The judge 'll be umpire, and each fellow use his own gun at thirty paces."

Louise and Lucy stood at one side, where the Sheriff and Judge Banks joined them, leaving Bancroft and Conrad to begin their match. Beneath her calm exterior Miss Dent's thoughts were in a tumult, and fierce resentment against the cattleman was rising in her heart. Had not Aleck suffered enough already? Why should he be hunted down like this when he was willing to make restitution, even after all these years? Oh, cruel! to beat him down again, when he had won success and respect once more! This man was a savage in his implacable desire for revenge.

Curtis raised his revolver. With both eyes open and without pausing to take aim, he sent a bullet through the bull's-eye. "Delafield won't have much chance against a man who can do that!" he exclaimed in a triumphant undertone to Bancroft.

As the test of skill went on, it developed that the banker excelled if he took time to

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aim accurately, while he of Socorro Springs was the superior at quick shooting.

"It 's my specialty in the shooting line," said Curtis. "You 'd better practise it, Aleck. It 's the thing that counts most if you get into a scrimmage."

He handed his hat, a wide-brimmed, gray felt, to Judge Banks, asking him to throw it up, adding, "I 'd do it myself if my left arm was n't in dry dock." He raised his revolver as the hat left the judge's hand; there were three quick reports, and he sprang forward and caught the descending sombrero on the muzzle of his pistol. The three perforations in the crown of the hat were so close together that a silver dollar covered them.

"Bravo!" exclaimed the judge. "I don't know but two other men who can do that. Little Jack Wilder never misses the trick, and Emerson Mead, over at Las Plumas, does it as if he were a machine and could n't miss. If you ever get a grudge against me, Mr. Conrad, I 'll engage the undertaker and order my tombstone at once!"

Bancroft turned away quickly. He swung his arm upward, fired, and found that his bullet had hardly nicked the outer rim of the target.

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"Don't pay any attention to your gun," Curtis admonished him. "Keep both eyes open, look at the bull's-eye, and unconsciously you 'll aim right at it. If you get into a gun play, where it 's a choice between giving up the ghost yourself or getting the other fellow's, you want to fasten your eyes on his most accessible part, point your gun that way, and shoot on the wink. Between the eyes is a good place, for then you can hold him with your own. That 's the way I shall fix Delafield," he added, dropping his voice.

Cold anger seized upon Bancroft as the picture of that gun muzzle close to his own forehead came vividly into his imagination. Until now Conrad had not mentioned the subject of Delafield to him since the day of his return to town, and the banker's friendly feelings had renewed themselves with the growth of his own confidence and with his desire to compass what he wished without violence. But Curtis had only to speak of his purpose in this cold-blooded manner for the banker to know that he, too, was rapidly becoming as implacable as his pursuer.

Judge Banks was talking to Miss Dent about the view and the New Mexican climate, and quoting Wordsworth on "the witchery of

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the soft blue sky." She was compelling an expression of smiling interest, while her thoughts were with Bancroft and his danger. The desire possessed her to stand near him, to hover about him, as if her mere presence would protect him from peril. The friendly revolver practice between the two men made her sick at heart, and she was waiting with inward impatience for the moment when she could propose returning to the veranda.

Lucy and Sheriff Tillinghurst were laughing and talking together in a running game of playful coquetry on her part and admiring badinage on his. "Now, Miss Lucy," he was saying, "if you-all are going to be my deputy, you 'll have to learn to shoot with at least one eye open. I can't have my deputy shootin' around promiscuous with both eyes shut. It might be used against me in the campaign."

"Oh, I 'll keep both eyes open, just as Mr. Conrad says," she exclaimed, taking the Sheriff's revolver from his hand. "Just like this," she went on gayly, pointing the pistol straight at Curtis's face as he came toward them, saying, "Now you must have another chance, Miss Bancroft."

Tillinghurst sprang forward as he saw her

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level the revolver and struck it up with his hand. Her pressure on the trigger had been light, but the contraction of her finger as the Sheriff knocked it upward discharged the weapon. The bullet sang through the air; and she paled and staggered backward, looking wildly from one to the other as she exclaimed:

"Oh, I was sure it was n't loaded!"

"A gentleman's gun is always loaded, Miss Lucy," said the Sheriff, mild reproof in his tone.

Lucy leaned, trembling, against Miss Dent's supporting arm. "I — I was sure we shot out all the bullets," she stammered, looking wistfully at Conrad. "I 'll never, never touch a gun again."

"Don't feel so worried, Miss Bancroft," urged Curtis, gently. "You were n't pressing the trigger, and I 'd have ducked if you had, for I was watching your hand. I was n't in the least danger, and you must n't think about it again. It 'll be your turn next, Miss Dent," he added jocosely. "Aleck had his the other day, and sent a bullet into the wall just above my head."

"And you still have confidence in us, you reckless man!" Louise exclaimed with

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a little effort at gayety, but with eyes on the ground.

"Perhaps he thinks he 'll be in less danger if he teaches you-all how to handle your guns," the Sheriff commented, as Miss Dent led the way back to the house.

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CHAPTER XIV

THREE LETTERS

"HELLO, Curt! When are you going back to the ranch?"

Pendleton, the invalid from the East, accosted Conrad as he emerged from the physician's office, where he had gone for a last dressing of his wounds before returning to the round-up.

"Right now, Mr. Pendleton. Anything I can do for you?"

"Say, Curt, I've been wondering if I couldn't flirt gravel along with your bunch for a while. I want to take in everything that's going while I'm here. I've never been on a ranch, or seen a round-up, or a steer on the prod; and I'd like to see how things are done. Would a tenderfoot be in your way?"

"Not a bit of it! Come right along, Pendy, if you think you can stand it. You'll have to rough it, you know; sleep on the ground with your saddle for a pillow, ride hard, and eat what comes."

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"Oh, I can stand whatever the rest of you do. I don't fork a horse as well as a cowboy or a circus rider, but I can stick on, and I can get there 'most as soon as anybody — I mighty near got there too soon when we went after Melgares, did n't I?"

"All right, Pendleton! If you think you can stand it, come right along with me this morning. I 'm going to ride the rest of the day and most of the night; but if that 's too much for you you can stop over at the ranch to-night, and catch up with us to-morrow."

"I reckon I 'll take it all in along with you, and I 'll meet you in half an hour in front of the court-house," and Pendleton bustled off. Conrad went after his mare, dropping into Bancroft's office for a last word.

The president of the First National Bank was reading his morning's mail. He frowned over a note from Rutherford Jenkins reminding him that the first of the month was approaching, and warning him not to forget the remittance due on that day. He looked at the calendar. No; he could not take time before the first to go to Las Vegas and crack the whip he was preparing over Jenkins's head; he would have to make this payment. Next he opened a letter from Dellmey Baxter:

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"My dear Bancroft: — I think you 'd better correct young Conrad's curious notion that I had anything to do with José Gonzalez's attack upon him, or with José's going down there. If you don't he might turn his suspicions in some other direction. Of course, there 's nothing in it but that greaser's bad temper. But he thinks there is, and he 's just hot-headed enough to make it uncomfortable for anybody he happens to suspect. I did n't send José to him and so, naturally, I can't do anything about it, even if the fellow does get angry and act like the devil.

"I 'm sorry I can't help you in your desire to retire from our Rio Grande valley land business. I 'm tied up so that I 've got no ready money with which to buy you out. Of course, if you are determined to get out, you might find a purchaser elsewhere. But as a friend I advise you not to sell. There 's going to be big money in it, and we can probably launch the enterprise within the next six months. You 'll make a great mistake if you quit. If you decide to stay in I 'm willing for you to keep on as a silent partner, just as we have done so far."

The banker scowled, swearing softly to himself as he read the first paragraph. "Did n't send him, did n't he," he grumbled. "Then who did? I did n't, that 's sure. He recommended the fellow as a good cowboy,

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and Conrad engaged him. I had nothing to do with it." He was silent again as he studied the second part of the letter. A suspicion rose in his mind that Baxter was purposely making it difficult, almost impossible, for him to get out of the land scheme. What was his purpose in so doing? Did the Congressman wish to keep a hold on him to hamper, perhaps even to control, his movements? "I wonder," Bancroft thought, "if Dell is afraid I 'll try to cut him out politically before he 's ready to step down. I 'd like his place well enough if — but that 's something out of my reckoning for a long time yet, even if everything goes right." The surmise that Baxter wished to have such a bridle upon him left him uneasy. Well, he would have to let this thing go on as it was. If he tried to sell to any one else knowledge of his connection with it might leak out and reach Lucy's ears. He winced as he thought of her feeling toward Baxter because of this business. And the investment promised well; rich returns might be expected from it soon. Nobody knew of his part in it except Dell, and if he stayed in and kept quiet it was unlikely that anybody else would find it out. That might be the safer plan, after all.

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Conrad came to the door, and after a few minutes' talk Bancroft said to him, remembering Baxter's injunction, "Well, Curt, I hope you won't find that your crazy Mexican has been trying to kill off all your men."

Curtis laughed. "Oh, José will be all right; and he's the best cow-punch I've got on the ranch. Dell Baxter will attend to him."

"That's an absurd notion of yours that Baxter had anything to do with it," replied Bancroft, the Congressman's letter still in his mind. "You're not reasonable about Dell. Why should he want you assassinated?"

"The only reason I can see is that I've been talking pretty plain about him. But if he doesn't like the kind of things I say he'll have to get used to it, or else reform."

"Nonsense, Curt. And even if he does think you're handling the Castleton money against —"

Curtis made a gesture of impatience. "I hope you don't take any stock in that talk, Aleck. The Castletons don't care a hang about this campaign, and Dell knows it. They're not putting up a cent, or, if Ned is doing anything for his wife's sake, he's dealing with Johnny Martinez direct."

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Bancroft looked at him narrowly. "Is that right, Curt? Are you sure of it?"

"As sure as I am of anything," the cattleman responded with emphasis. "They've never mentioned the subject to me."

After Conrad had gone the banker walked the floor in anxious thought. What, then, did that five-hundred-dollar check mean that Curtis had given to Jenkins? Perhaps he was holding the young man off, saying he was not yet sure of Delafield's identity and needed money to carry on his investigation, intending to give up his secret if he should find that he could bleed Bancroft no longer. That would be like Jenkins, he decided. As soon as he could get away he would go to Las Vegas and see if the fellow could be cowed by the knowledge that had come to him so opportunely. As for Conrad, it would be better to wait until he could learn whether those checks would produce the effect desired.

In front of the court-house the ranchman met Tillinghurst and Little Jack Wilder. The Sheriff had a subpœna commanding him to appear as a witness for the State in the Melgares trial, set for June. Curtis remarked, as they talked of the case: "I reckon you'll have Pendleton as a witness; he'll want to

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take in the whole thing. Have you seen anything of him? He promised to meet me here. He 's going back with me; says he wants to take in a round-up and see a steer on the prod. I sure reckon I 'll have my hands full if I keep the boys from taking him in."

"Let 'em run him, Curt, let 'em run him," said the Sheriff. "He 's good-natured, and he 'll soon strike their gait. He was never outside of New England before, and he 's tryin' mighty hard to be tougher than anybody else on the border. He 's been in town three weeks, and he calls everybody by their first names, from Judge Banks down to my Mexican stable-boy. He writes down all the slang he hears every day, sits up nights to study it, and the next day slings it around as free and easy as an old-timer. Is that him comin' yonder? Say, Curt, he 'll stampede every cow-brute you 've got on the range!"

Pendleton, short, stout, and large of girth, had dressed himself for roughing it according to his own idea of custom and comfort. He wore a Mexican straw sombrero tied down over his ears with a red bandanna, a red flannel shirt, a long linen coat, huge spurs, and sheepskin *chaparejos*.

"Oh, where did you get that coat?" the

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three men sang out as he came within hearing distance. Pendleton caught the tails in his finger tips and danced some sidewise steps.

"Ain't she a beaut?" he shouted. "I found it in a store down in Dobytown."

"Say, Pendy," called the Sheriff, "if you go pervadin' and pesterin' around among Curt's steers in those duds I 'll have to send Jack down there to arrest you for breach of the peace."

"All right, Tilly! I 'm here for my health, but I 'm takin' in on the side everything that comes my way!"

Conrad found a letter at the ranch addressed to José Gonzalez, in his care, and grinned with satisfaction as he recognized Baxter's handwriting. "He 's buffaloed all right and is calling off his man," he thought as he opened with eager curiosity a missive from Baxter for himself:

"MY DEAR YOUNG FRIEND: — I assure you that you are barking up the wrong tree when you try to connect me with any attack the Mexican, José Gonzalez, may have made upon you. In fact, it is so much up the wrong tree that I feel pretty sure there is n't any tree there at all! His assault was probably the result of sudden anger. The man has worked for me a good deal,

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and I know that such is his character. I have some influence with him, and I shall write him at once and give him a lecture on the necessity of controlling his temper. I have had occasion to do this several times in the past, not without effect. I shall tell him that you are a man of your word, and a crack shot, and that if he does n't keep cool he 's likely to die with his boots on. Nobody could blame you, my dear Mr. Conrad, if you should shoot him under such a necessity of self-defence. I take it ill, however, that you should connect me with this greaser's outrageous temper and crazy actions. I assure you again that you are entirely mistaken in your assumption, which, permit me to say, is what might very well be called gratuitous.

"I congratulate Johnny Martinez upon having the support of a gentleman so energetic, influential, and enthusiastic as yourself, and I remain,

"Yours very cordially,

"DELLMEY BAXTER."

Conrad laughed aloud over the letter, exclaiming as he finished it, "He 's a slick one, he is!"

Another letter bore the imprint of Tremper & Townsend, and contained a check for five hundred dollars and a brief note saying that their client, Sumner L. Delafield, wished them to send him this money as a second instalment of the amount due his father's estate,

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and to add that like sums would follow in rapid succession. Conrad scowled and gnawed his moustache as he read the letter the second time. He was considering whether he had any right to accept the money and continue his quest of vengeance. Delafield evidently meant to buy him off with it and, if he accepted, did he not tacitly accept that condition?

"I 'll send it back to him," was his first thought, as he reached for a pen. But another idea stayed his hand. The former check he had divided between his brother and sisters, and, as they knew nothing of his scheme of revenge, this also ought to go to them. But Delafield must know upon what terms he accepted the money. With a grim look on his face he wrote to the Boston attorneys:

"I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of a second check for five hundred dollars from your client, Sumner L. Delafield. I am reasonably grateful that an unexpected sense of remorse has led him to loose his purse-strings, even at this late day, and on behalf of my brother and sisters will ask you to send him their thanks. As for myself, you may tell him that I hope the sending of the money has eased his conscience, for it will procure him no other benefit. Every cent of money he sees fit to send me I shall turn over to my father's other

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children, while I shall find entire satisfaction in following out my revenge. What that is he doubtless knows, for the sending of these checks convinces me that he is moved, not by the honest wish to do what he can toward righting a dastardly wrong, but by the desire to save his own skin. Please tell him, from me, that he cannot buy immunity from my purpose, even though he should send me the whole of the debt three times over."

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CHAPTER XV

VILLAINY UNMASKED

PENDLETON, bouncing in his saddle as they galloped southward, bent admiring glances upon the erect figure of his companion, whose seat was as steady as if horse and rider had been welded together. "Say, Curt," he finally called out, "how do you do it? I'd give my bad lung if I could ride like you."

Conrad gave him some instruction, and Pendleton turned all his attention toward learning how to bring his body into rhythmic accord with the movements of his horse. The cattleman, pounding along in silence, thought with satisfaction of the progress his search for Delafield was making and planned how he should carry it on after the round-up, when he would have more leisure. He would make a list of the men in New Mexico rich and prominent enough to come under suspicion, investigate their records, one by one, and so by elimination discover the person he wanted. Then would come the meeting!

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His thoughts full of the climax of his search, he rode on in a sort of exaltation, unconsciously humming a song he and Lucy Bancroft had been practising. Presently, through the silence, the sound entered his conscious hearing, and took his thoughts back to the pleasant hour he and she had spent over it. But a vague uneasiness stirred his feelings as the image of Lucy floated past the background of that grisly, dominating purpose. The thought of her persisted; as it clung there, along the edge of his absorption, it brought a sharp and curious suggestion of the maimed bird he had carried in his bosom. He was suddenly conscious of discomfort, as if he had hurt some helpless thing, when his reverie was broken by a series of wild yells from his companion. Pendleton had been lagging behind, but he now came dashing forward, giving vent to his delight because he had so far mastered the art of riding that he no longer bounced all over the horse's back nor fell forward and seized its mane at each change of gait.

A spring welled alluringly from a dimple in the hillside. Pendleton dismounted, saying he was thirsty. "Don't drink from that spring, Pendy," Conrad admonished

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him. It 's alkali, and you 'll wish you had n't."

"It looks all right, and it 's cool," said the tenderfoot, dipping his hand in the water. "My throat 's as hot and dry as that road. What harm will it do?"

"Well, pretty soon you 'll think you 're chewing cotton; and it may make you sick, though this spring is n't strong enough of alkali to do you much harm."

"I 'll risk it," Pendleton declared, scooping up some water in his hat-brim. "It 's wet when it goes down, anyway. And I reckon I might as well take in an alkali spring, too, while I 've got the chance. Everything goes!" An hour later he galloped alongside of Conrad, working his jaws and licking his lips. "Say, Curt," he mumbled, "I know a fellow back home who 'd give a thousand dollars for such a thirst as I 've got!"

It was midnight when they passed Rock Springs, where the superintendent had left his outfit. Two hours later, when Brown Betty put out her nose and neighed, an answering whinny came back from beyond the next hill. "That 's only Five Cottonwoods," thought Curtis. "It can't be they 've got no farther than that!" They gained the top of

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the hill and below them, in the light of the waning moon, they saw the white top of the chuck-wagon, the dark patch of sleeping cattle patrolled by a single horseman, and the figures of the men sprawled on the ground around the dying coals of their evening fire.

"Here we are, Pendy!" said Curtis. "I thought they would have got farther than this, and that we'd have at least two hours more of travel. Now we'll have time for a little sleep before you begin busting those broncs."

They stretched themselves on the ground and almost instantly fell asleep. But it was not long before Conrad, rousing suddenly, sprang to his feet, realizing even before he was fairly awake that the cattle were stampeding. From down the hill came a thundering, rushing sound, the noise of hundreds of hoofs pounding the ground. He called his foreman, seized his saddle, and rushed to the bunch of tethered cow-ponies, Peters, Texas Bill, Red Jack, and José Gonzalez close behind. As they dashed after the flying herd Curtis could see in the dim light the figure of the cowboy who had been patrolling the sleeping cattle. He was following the stampede at what his employer thought a leisurely pace.

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"Who was riding herd?" he yelled to Peters, who replied, "Andy Miller."

"Is he trying to drive them farther away?" Conrad muttered angrily, pressing home his spur.

The cattle tore wildly down the hill, but at its foot their leaders turned up the course of the dry shallow valley instead of pressing up the other side. The men saw the movement, and by cutting across the hillside gained rapidly upon the fleeing animals. As they passed Andy Miller, Curtis shouted to him that he might return to the camp, as they should not need him. The draw soon began to grow deeper and narrower, and the dense mass of cattle was forced to lessen its pace. Conrad remembered that farther on the valley came to an abrupt end against a steep rise. If the brutes stayed in it a little longer they would not be able to get out, and when they came to the end of this blind alley of the hills they would have to stop. So he and his companions galloped easily along beside the shadowy stream of moving backs with its spray of tossing horns that filled the draw, and presently found the leaders, their heads to the bluff, chewing their cuds as quietly as if they had never been frightened in all their lives.

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As they rode back to camp behind the staidly moving herd, Conrad asked Peters if he knew what caused the stampede. The foreman did not know, he had been sound asleep when it began. But he went on to tell an excited tale of mysterious accidents that had followed close upon one another ever since the morning of the superintendent's departure. Only the edge of the sand storm through which he had ridden touched them, though it had kept them in camp all day. Nevertheless, there had been two stampedes, and they had had much trouble getting the brutes together again. Every day since there had been at least one stampede of the herd. He and the others had been kept busy gathering in the flying cattle. This was why they had got no farther than Five Cottonwoods. It seemed as if the devil himself had taken possession of every cow-brute on the range; never in all his years as a cow-puncher had he had such a time.

"Don't you know what starts them?"

"That 's the mischief of it. Nobody ever knows. The darned critters just get up and hike. Some of the boys are gettin' skeery about it, and they 're likely to pull their freight if it keeps up. They 're tellin' ghost stories

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now after supper, and Andy Miller has been reelin' off the whoppin'est yarns ever you heard. Between the ghost stories and the way the cow-brutes act the boys are gettin' plumb fidgety, and I 'm mighty glad you 've got back."

"How does Andy get on with the work? Does he *sabe?*"

"Yes; he 's first rate; the best we 've got, except José. But Andy does have main bad luck with the cow-brutes. This makes four times they 've stampeded under him."

Promise of day was flushing the eastern sky and faintly warming the gray semi-darkness when Pendleton's eyes flew open, to instant conviction of illness. From head to foot he ached with weariness, and he felt wretchedly sick. For a moment he kept quiet, feeling that it would be more comfortable to lie still and die than to try to move. But presently he thought, "I 'll never live to die of consumption if I don't get up quick and find my whiskey!"

He scrambled to his feet and looked around. Not nearly so many men were stretched on the ground as he had expected to see, and his friend was not in sight. He looked for his saddle-bags, where he kept his flask.

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Conrad had taken them from the horse when they unsaddled, and Pendleton had not noticed what he did with them. He could not find the bags, everybody left in camp was sound asleep, and Curtis had disappeared. Wrapped in his blanket he was wandering around forlornly, squirming with pain, when he saw some one moving in the group of horses farther down the hill. He started in that direction and saw the man stoop beside Conrad's mare, Brown Betty.

"Hello, pard! Where's Curt?" Pendleton called loudly. The man straightened up quickly, and put away a knife. He looked at the curious figure coming toward him, and burst into a loud guffaw. "Gee whillikens, stranger! where'd you drop from?" he shouted back.

Pendleton explained, and asked the other to help him find his saddle-bags. They were discovered in the chuck-wagon, and the invalid offered his flask, with a cordial admonition to "drink hearty, pard." The cowboy responded literally, and made several other visits to the saddle-bags before breakfast. By that time he was good-naturedly obstreperous, and had the camp in an uproar with his horse-play and noisy pranks. Conrad asked

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Peters where Andy got his whiskey. The foreman did not know, and said that this was the first time he had shown any signs of drink. The superintendent went to Pendleton.

"Has Andy Miller been taking a pull at your flask?"

"The cow-punch that's feeling so happy? Sure, Curt. He helped me find my saddle-bags, and I thought I'd be sociable with him. I told him to drink hearty; and by thunder, Curt! you ought to have seen him. He sure had a worse thirst on him than I had yesterday."

"I'll have to ask you not to do it again with any of them. And you'd better let me put your flask in a locked box I have in the chuck-wagon, if you don't carry it in your pocket, or you may not have any left by night."

Gonzalez came up with a question, and Conrad remembered the letter he had for him. The Mexican took it with an unconcerned face, and went off behind the chuck-wagon. "I don't need to see the inside of it," thought Curtis; "but I'd like to all the same. Well, he'll be all right now, and I'm glad of it, for I'd hate to have to kill as good a roper as he is."

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A few minutes later José strolled toward the cook's fire, twisting the letter in his fingers. He was about to thrust it into the coals when Andy Miller jumped at him with a yell, and caught his hand. "Here, boys; José's got a love letter! Let's read it!" he shouted. Gonzalez resisted; Miller bore him down; and they rolled, struggling, over the ground. José's dark face was pale with anger and his teeth were set as he gripped the bit of paper in one fist and pummelled Andy's face with the other. Miller tried to shield himself from the blows with his arms, while he bent his energies to getting possession of the letter.

"You're fightin', Andy; don't fergit to punch!" yelled Nosey Ike from the group of cowboys looking on. Miller was the stronger of the two, and almost had the Mexican in his power when Conrad came beside them, saying, "If you want the letter burned, José, give it to me."

Gonzalez cast at him one doubtful, desperate look, and threw the twisted paper toward him. The superintendent thrust it in the fire, and he and Peters separated the two men. Gonzalez flashed at him a look of gratitude and walked away without a word.

"Andy," said Conrad, "you're making too

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much trouble this morning. If you want to work with this outfit you 've got to keep straight. If you don't want to do that vou can pull your freight right now."

The man turned away sullenly. "I 'm not ready to pull my freight yet," he muttered. The other cowboys were saddling their ponies and making ready to begin the day's work. The bunched cattle, with the red rays of the morning sun warm upon their backs, were quietly grazing a little way down the hillside. Andy Miller started toward his horse, but turned and ran rapidly at the cattle. No one noticed what he was doing until, in a moment more, he was jumping, yelling, and swinging his hat at the edge of the herd. Snorting with sudden surprise and fright, the beasts were away again as though fiends were at their tails. Conrad rushed for his horse, but Peters, already mounted, yelled that they would not need him; and the foreman, with half a dozen others, dashed after the stampede.

Andy Miller was coming slowly back, now and then stopping to smite his thigh and laugh. Curtis walked out to meet him. "Andy," he said, "I reckon I don't need you any longer. You can take your time this morning. Here 's your money."

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The cowboy looked up, grinning, and thrust the bills in his pocket. Then, as quickly and lightly as a cat, he sprang upon the superintendent and pulled him down. Conrad, taken completely by surprise, with his left arm in a sling and at something less than his best of strength, for a moment could do nothing but struggle in the other's grasp. Miller was holding him, face downward, across one advanced leg, when Pendleton, still wrapped in his blanket, bustled up to see what was happening. With upraised hand, Miller yelled:

"Now, then, you 'll get it back, every dam' spank, an' more too! Jenkins ain't big enough to spank you himself, but I can do it for him!" His hand descended, but into an enveloping blanket suddenly thrown over him from behind, muffling head, body, and arms.

"I 've got him, Curt! Get up, quick, and we 'll do him up!" shouted the tenderfoot as he twisted the blanket around Andy's struggling figure.

Conrad wrenched himself free and sprang up, his face white. "Let him up, Pendy," he said, drawing his revolver. The other unwound the blanket, and Miller scrambled

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out, blinking and cursing. "You make tracks out of this camp as fast as you can go," said Curtis, "and don't let me catch you within gunshot of this outfit again! Clear out, this minute, damn you!"

Miller walked away in silence toward his staked horse, the two men following him part way down the hill.

"He' d better clear out before the boys get back, if he wants to keep a sound neck," said Conrad, his revolver in hand and his eyes on the retreating cowboy. "I understand it all now. And it was a lucky thing, Pendy, that you gave him that whiskey this morning; it got him just drunk enough to show his hand. If it had n't been for that I might not have caught on till he 'd done the Lord knows how much mischief. It 's just like that damned skunk, Jenkins, to go at it in this sneaking, underhand way. He 's not through with me yet!"

They watched while Miller saddled his horse, hung his rope at the saddle-horn, and mounted. Then they turned back toward the camp, but presently, at a whinny from Brown Betty, Curtis faced about. Miller had ridden to where she was standing, a little apart from the other horses, had leaped to the ground,

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and was making toward her hind-quarters. His body was in profile, and as he stretched out his arm Conrad saw the flash of sunlight upon a knife blade. Instantly his arm swung upward, and there was an answering flash from the muzzle of his revolver. The report boomed across the valley, and Andy's right arm dropped. He rushed toward them, yelling foul names, but halted when he saw the pistol levelled at his breast.

"No more tricks, Andy," called the superintendent, "or it 'll be through your heart next time. Git, right now!"

From up the valley came the shouts of the men. They had turned the cattle and were hurrying them back to camp. Miller cast one quick glance in their direction, and leaped to his saddle. He made a wide detour, the tail of his eye on Conrad's gun, and galloped away on the road over which the outfit had come. The others trooped up where Curtis and Pendleton, at the top of the hill, were watching his lessening figure.

"Boys," said the ranchman, "that 's the chap that 's been stampeding the cattle!" Peters swore a mouth-filling oath and smote his thigh. "He was just on the point of ham-stringing Brown Betty," Curtis went on,

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his eyes blazing, "and I put a bullet through his arm barely in time to prevent it."

A light broke upon Pendleton. "Darn my skin, if that was n't the trick the critter was up to this morning, when he saw me and stopped!"

"Let 's go after him, boys!" shouted Peters. The group of riders shot forward, like racers starting at the word, and thundered down the road after the culprit. Conrad looked after them grimly, his eyes flashing blue fire, and Pendleton, wrapped in his blanket again, danced about and yelled, "Go it, boys, go it! I wish I was with you!"

For an hour they chased him. He, knowing what his fate would be if he fell into their hands, put spurs to his horse until he brought out its utmost speed. Having so much the start he kept well in the lead, and finally they gave it up and returned to camp.

With his left arm still in a sling and his shoulder bandaged, Conrad kept at the head of the round-up, which went on without further accident. He was too busy to think of the pain, except at night, when it often kept him awake. At such times his mind was sure to busy itself, sooner or later, with the trailing of Delafield, reaching out in every

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direction for some clew to guide his next step. By some trick of subconscious mental action, thoughts of Lucy Bancroft began to intrude upon his mind when it was thus engaged. It pleased him well enough to think of Lucy at other times, of her bright, piquant face, of the positive opinions she was in the habit of pronouncing with that independent little toss of her curly head, and of her dimpling smiles. But it annoyed him that the thought of her should come into conflict with his one absorbing idea. And, just because he had been consciously disturbed by it twice or thrice, association of ideas brought back the image more and more frequently. Once, when he had been vainly wooing sleep for an hour, he caught himself wondering what Lucy would say about the Delafield affair. He muttered an angry oath at himself, and with a mighty effort put both subjects out of his mind. It was not until they reached Pelham, the railway station whence the cattle were to be shipped, that his shoulder became free enough from pain for him to sink into sleep as soon as he lay down; and thereafter his mind forbore its irritating trick.

During all that time, although Conrad did not believe he had anything to fear from

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José Gonzalez, he never left his revolver out of easy reach, and never turned his back upon the Mexican. But Gonzalez kept on his way as calmly and apparently as unconsciously as if he had had no part in that episode beside the pool at Rock Springs. Near the end of the shipping Curtis asked him if he would like steady work at the ranch.

The Mexican gave a little astonished start and cast at the superintendent a glance of suspicion. Conrad frowned and his eyes flashed. Then he grinned good-naturedly, showing his strong white teeth under his sunburned moustache. "That 's all right, José. I 'm not that sort. As long as you behave yourself I 'm your friend. If you don't, I 've told you what will happen. You 've struck my gait in the cow business, and I want to keep you. If you want to stay you can understand right now that you run no risks, unless you make 'em yourself."

Gonzalez threw at him a keen glance. "You know I have nothing against you, Don Curtis," he began, hesitating a moment before he went on; "I like to work for you very well, señor, and I will stay."

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CHAPTER XVI

A DOUBLE BLUFF

ALEXANDER BANCROFT read Conrad's defiant letter, duly forwarded by his Boston attorneys, with a nearer approach to desperation than he had known in years. He had hoped so much from that money; and it had been thrown away! The man was inflexible, and to attempt to turn him from his deadly purpose by peaceful means would be a waste of time. And time was precious, for, now that he and his detective knew so much, one clew that they might discover any day would throw the door wide open. He must be foiled before he had time to make another move. Bancroft laid on his desk the letter he had been reading, feeling to the bottom of his heart that he would be justified in taking any course that would halt the feet of his pursuer.

A clerk came to ask his presence in the outer room, and he went out hastily, intending to return at once. But a man with busi-

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ness in which both were interested awaited him, and after a moment's conversation they went to find a third who was concerned in the same matter.

They had only just gone when Lucy came in and asked for her father. She looked sweet and dainty in a white gown with a wide white hat tied under her chin, her curls clustering around a face all aglow with warm browns and rich reds. The clerk who pressed forward with pleased alacrity to answer her question was one of her ardent admirers. Mr. Bancroft had just gone out, probably for only a few minutes; would n't she wait? It was of no consequence, she said; she only wished to see if he had any mail for her. But she looked disappointed, and the clerk suggested that as he had left his office door unlocked she might go in and wait. She saw a pile of unopened letters on her father's desk and glanced through it, finding two for Miss Dent and one for herself. "I 'll just sit here and read mine," she thought, "and maybe daddy will be back by that time."

A little gust of wind came through the open window, blowing a sheet of paper from the desk to the floor. Her eye caught the signature as she picked it up. "Curtis Conrad!"

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she read. "Oh, how like him his writing looks!" she exclaimed, a wave of color surging into her cheeks. "Why, it seems as if I just knew it would be like this! How easy it is to read!" She was looking at the letter, her attention absorbed in the fact that it had come from Conrad's own hand, when Delafield's name stood out from the other words.

"Delafield! Sumner L. Delafield! I remember that name. It's the name of the man that ruined his father — why, it's a receipt for that money! How does daddy happen to have it?" Her eyes ran eagerly along the lines. "It's just like him! I'm glad he wouldn't take the money! What a horrid, wicked man that Delafield must be! I wonder how daddy happens to have this letter, when it was written to Tremper & Townsend, in Boston!" Her glance fell on the torn envelope bearing the imprint of the Boston firm, addressed to her father, and thence to their letter beside it. With mind intent upon the bewildering problem her eyes rushed over the brief missive:

"As you requested, we deposited your check for five hundred dollars to our account, and forwarded our check for the same amount to Mr. Curtis Conrad. We enclose his letter in receipt, which he evidently wishes sent on to you."

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Lucy dropped the sheet of paper and sprang to her feet, her mind awhirl with protest. No, no! this could not be meant for her father — he was not Delafield — it was impossible! But — something clutched at her throat, and her head swam. She must go home; she must think out the puzzle. Sudden unwillingness to meet her father seized her. He must not know she had been there, that she had seen anything. She was not yet thinking coherently, only feeling that she had thoughtlessly surprised some secret, which had sprung out at her like a jack-in-the-box, and that she must give no sign of having seen its face.

She sped homeward, her brain in a turmoil, and it was not until she had shut herself in her room that she began to think clearly. A troop of recollections, disjointed, half-forgotten bits and ends of things swarmed upon her. The shock had roused her mind to unusual activity, and little things long past, forgotten for years, again came vividly into her memory.

So suddenly that it made her catch her breath there flashed upon her the recollection of how once, when she was a tiny child, some one had halted beside her mother and herself in a city

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street and exclaimed "Mrs. Delafield!" Her mother had hurried on without noticing the salutation, and had satisfied her curiosity afterward by explaining that the person was a stranger who had mistaken her for somebody else. But Lucy had thought the name a pretty one and used it in her play, pretending that she had a little playmate so called. Their wanderings during her childhood came back to her, when they had gone often from one place to another, at first in Canada, afterward always in the West. Much of the time she and her mother were alone, but her father came occasionally to spend with them a few days or weeks. Her devotion to him dated from those early years, when she thought so much about him during his long absences, wished so ardently for his return, and enjoyed his visits with unalloyed delight.

With new significance came the recollection of the beginning for them of the name of Bancroft. While she was still a little girl her mother had told her their name would no longer be Brown, but Bancroft, because they had been allowed to change it. She had liked the new name much better, had accepted it with the unquestioning acquiescence of

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childhood, and the old name had soon become but a dim memory.

Like a blow at her heart, because of the conviction it brought, the remembrance rushed upon her of an occasion not long after the change of name. She had wakened in the night and, drowsily floating in and out of sleep, had heard snatches of talk between her parents. Something regarding danger to her father had won her attention. He had replied that it would be quite safe, because only when he visited them would he be known as Bancroft, and that henceforth he would probably be able to spend more time with them. Her mother had feared and questioned, but he had reassured her and insisted that Lucy must be kept more steadily in school and that both mother and daughter must have a settled home. She could not remember all that he said, but meaningful scraps came back which had impressed her because they were concerned with that vague peril which her mother seemed to fear. He had said something about there being "no danger now," "nobody would recognize him," "everybody had forgotten it by this time"; finally, her childish anxiety assured that he was not really in jeopardy, she had sunk back happily into

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sleep and thought little more about it. After that she and her mother lived part of the time in Denver and part in San Francisco, and her father was with them more than before.

Every recollection that emerged from that dubious past strengthened the fear that had gripped her heart with the reading of the letters. One by one she was forced to give up the suppositions with which she tried to account for her father's possession of those letters. With all her strength she fought against the one evident conclusion. But at last the conviction fell upon her with chill certainty that they were on her father's desk because they were meant for him, and that he was the Sumner L. Delafield of that long past, disgraceful affair.

With hands clenched against her heart, which was aching with the soreness of bruised flesh, she whispered, "To take the money of all those people, and ruin them; and it killed some — oh, daddy, daddy, it was you who did it!" All the world had suddenly become one great, enveloping pain that wrung her heart anew with every recurring realization that her adored father had been so wicked — to her mind so abominably wicked. It was significant of her youth and inexperience, and

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also of her moral quality, that she did not attempt to palliate or excuse his offence. He was guilty of wrongdoing, as Dellmey Baxter was guilty, but in a far worse measure, and the fact that he was her father would never temper her condemnation of his sin. In the midst of her anguish she grew conscious that her feeling toward him had changed, and knew that the life had gone out of her old honoring, adoring love. It was as if half her heart had been violently torn away. For the first time sobs shook her, as she moaned, "Daddy, daddy, I loved you so!" Forlorn and anguished, her longing turned back to the dead mother with imperious need of sympathy, understanding, and companionship.

Then came the thought that her mother had known this dreadful truth, and yet had stanchly held by him and shared its consequences. The sense of duty arose within her, trembling, apprehensive, but insistent. It seemed almost as if her mother had bequeathed this secret to her keeping that she might the better fill her place beside him with daughterly solicitude. The idea crystallized into whispered words as she tossed back her head and dried her eyes, "My mother stood by him, and so shall I!"

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He must never even suspect that she knew this horrible thing; she felt instinctively that it would cut him to the heart to learn that she had discovered his secret. For a moment she broke down again and moaned, "Why did I go into his office this morning! I wish I had n't, I wish I had n't! And then I would n't have had to know!" She quickly put aside this useless repining, to face the grim, painful fact once more. No; he must never guess that she knew he was other than he seemed, and he must never feel any change in her manner toward him. She must hide the secret deep, deep down in her heart, and she must keep their mutual life as it had always been. And there was Dearie — but she must know nothing of it; oh, no, never in the world must Dearie learn the least thing about this trouble!

Lucy felt very much alone, quite shut off, in her poignant need, from every one who might give her help, advice, or sympathy. As she sat there, encompassed by her loneliness and pain, her thoughts turned half unconsciously toward Curtis Conrad with instinctive longing for his protecting care and strength. Then she remembered. With a sharp flash that made her wince it came back

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to her that he meant to have revenge on Delafield; that she had heard him say he was on the man's trail, and would track him down and kill him! For a moment it staggered her, with a fierce new pain that struck through the keen ache in her breast, making her catch her breath in a gasping sob. But all her heart rose in quick denial. A faint smile held her trembling lip for an instant as she thought:

"Oh, no; he would n't! He would n't hurt daddy; and he would n't kill anybody! I know he would n't!"

She almost feared to meet her household; it seemed as if this awful knowledge which had come to her must be writ large upon her countenance. Would it be possible to take up the daily life again as if nothing had happened? A chasm so horrible had riven it, since the morning, that surely it could never be the same again. But when she finally summoned her resolution and went down to take up her daily duties, she found it not so hard as she had feared. That benign routine of daily, commonplace life, with its hourly demands upon thought and feeling and attention, which has saved so many hearts from breaking, met her at the very door of her

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room. She quickly learned to lean upon it, even to multiply its demands. At the outset it gave her the strength and courage to pass through her ordeal steadfastly; and after the first day it was not so hard. She began to feel pity for her father and a new tenderness as she thought of the years through which he had lived, knowing who he was and what he had done, and dreading always to be found out. But all her pity, tenderness, affection, and the old habit of lovingness that she was resolute to sustain were not always sufficient to overcome the revulsion that sometimes seized her.

One of these moments of revolt came to her as they lingered over the breakfast table a few days after her discovery. She made an excuse to attend to something in the kitchen, and hastily left the room. Her father had told them at the table that he was going to Las Vegas that morning. He waited, expecting her to return and go with him to the gate, and wave a last good-bye as he looked back on his way down the hill. She did not reappear, and at last he told Miss Dent that he would have to go or lose his train. Louise watched him from the window with yearning eyes that would not lift themselves

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from his figure until it disappeared from her view.

As he waited at the station Lucy rushed breathlessly to his side. "I was so afraid I should be too late!" she panted as she slipped her hand through his arm, "I ran all the way down the hill."

She clung so affectionately to him and looked up into his face with an appeal so wistful that he was touched, thinking only that she was sorrowing over his going away. It was the first time he had been separated from her since she had come to make her home with him. The conductor called, "All aboard!" and he kissed her tenderly, saying, "I'll be back day after to-morrow, little daughter."

She went home with that "little daughter" ringing in her ears and her heart. It brought back a wealth of memories of those childish, happy, longed-for times when her father came, so glad to see his "little daughter" that the days were not long enough to hold all the pleasures he wished to give her. It filled her breast with tenderness and a sort of yearning affection, more maternal than filial in quality, and made more ardent her desire to stand by him with perfect loyalty. But the old,

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joyous love that had been rooted deep in admiration, esteem, and honor no longer stirred within her. She knew that it would never fill her life again with its warmth and gladness, and that now and again she would have to struggle with that same aversion which had sent her that morning to hide herself in her room against his accustomed affectionate farewell. Nevertheless, she was pleased that a returning tide of tenderness, which was almost remorse, had swept over her in time for her to join him at the station.

Lucy's breathless rush to overtake him and the appealing tenderness of her manner during their moment together were sweet thoughts in Bancroft's mind as the train bore him northward. Dear little daughter! she grew dearer every day, and so did his pride and happiness in her. He longed to give her all the pleasures that his money could buy, just as he used to fill his pockets for her delight when she was a little girl. Once past these threatening dangers, they should have good times together. All his business enterprises were promising well; it would not be long before money would be plenty. Then, with clear sailing ahead and no ominous clouds, he could ask Louise to marry him.

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They would have to give up Lucy some time, but not for many a day. She was the sort of girl that is always attractive to men — why, half the young fellows in Golden were already dancing devoted attendance! — but she was very young; he and Louise still had many years in which to enjoy her, to travel with her and show her the world. Once past these threatening dangers, how fair was the world beyond! He would vanquish them yet, by whatever means might come to his hand! Each day's anxiety for the present and its longing for the fair future made his heart more desperate and reckless. He was hopeful that this coming interview with Rutherford Jenkins would make things easier for him in that quarter. Money would always keep Jenkins quiet, but to give up money to a blackmailer was like pouring it down a rat hole; if he kept it up the process was sure to cripple him in time.

Jenkins received him with smiling cordiality. "I 'm very glad to see you, Mr. Delafield — oh, I beg your pardon! — Mr. Bancroft. I always think of you as — ah, by the other name — and I sometimes forget in speaking."

"You 'd better not forget again," Bancroft interposed. "And, speaking of forgetting,

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there is a little matter concerning you that I 'm willing to let drop out of my memory. You know, of course, about the case of José Maria Melgares. Doubtless you know, also, how Melgares happened to steal Curtis Conrad's horse; and you could tell to a cent — to a jury, if necessary — how much money was given to Melgares in the rear of the Blue Front saloon to induce him to undertake the theft. I take it, however, that you would not care to have it brought into court, as a conviction on a charge of conspiracy would be sure to follow. I have all the evidence in my possession — quite enough to convict. I got it from Melgares' wife in the first place, and I have since secured his affidavit. But I have stopped her mouth, and his, and nobody else knows anything about it. I am quite willing to forget it myself if you will show equal courtesy concerning — certain other matters."

Jenkins grinned and licked his lips. "Really, my dear Mr. Delafield — excuse me — my dear Mr. Bancroft — I don't know what you are driving at! I suppose you mean that Melgares has been saying that I hired him to steal Conrad's horse. The thing is as false as it is absurd. If it were to come into court

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I should deny it absolutely, exactly as I do now. And the word of Rutherford Jenkins would stand for considerably more with a jury than that of a Mexican horse-thief."

"You are probably the only man in the Territory, Mr. Jenkins, who holds that opinion. Unless you take a more reasonable view of the matter I shall feel it my duty to see the district attorney as soon as I get home."

"See him, and be damned!" Jenkins broke out. "If you do, Curtis Conrad shall know before the week is out that you are Sumner L. Delafield."

Bancroft's eyes fell, but his reply came quickly enough: "Well, and what is that to me?"

"I guess you know what it will mean to you," Jenkins answered with a sneer. He did not know himself what it would mean to the banker, but he felt sure that it would answer quite as well to make pretence of knowledge. He watched his antagonist furtively in the momentary silence that followed.

"You don't seem to understand the full significance of the attitude you are taking," Bancroft presently went on. "Of course, I do not wish, just now, to have Conrad, or any one else, know all the events of my past

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life. I have been living an honorable life in this Territory, and you can very well comprehend that I do not wish my reputation and business success smashed — by you or anybody else. That is the only reason why I was willing to enter into an understanding with you. But my affairs are getting in such shape that I can soon snap my fingers at you or any one who tries to disclose my identity. At best, you 'll be able to get little more out of me, and I am amazed that you should be willing to risk this trial, with its certain disgrace, conviction, and sentence to the penitentiary, for the sake of the few hundred dollars of — blackmail — let us call it by its right name — that you may be able to extort from me."

"I am quite willing to take whatever risk there is," Jenkins interposed, "especially as my counsel could readily bring out the fact that you had tried to — blackmail — let us call it by its right name — to blackmail me before you gave the information. Do as you please about going to the district attorney; I don't care a damn whether you do or not. But, if you do, you 'll have to settle with Curt Conrad before the week is out!"

Bancroft arose, perceiving acutely that the

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only course left for him was to make a strong bluff and retreat. "Very well," he said, with an indifference he was far from feeling, "do as you like about that. Only don't delude yourself by supposing that Curt Conrad's knowing about that old affair will mean any more to me than anybody else's knowledge. When you think this proposal of mine over carefully I 'm sure you 'll change your mind, and I shall expect to hear from you to that effect."

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CHAPTER XVII

SENTENCE OF DEATH

AS the Spring days passed, in unbroken procession of rosy dawns, cloudless and glowing noons, and gorgeous sunsets, Louise Dent's resentment against Curtis Conrad grew keen and bitter. She saw the lines of worry appearing in Bancroft's face, and surprised now and then in his eyes an anxious abstraction; and in her heart she stormed against the man she supposed to be the sole cause of it all. Dreading his next visit lest she might betray her feeling, she longed to drive him from the house, when he should come, with burning, shaming words. But Bancroft, who knew as much of his intention as she did, was on terms of cordial friendship with him, and she must take her cue from her friend and host.

Toward Bancroft himself her heart grew more tenderly solicitous as her womanly instincts divined his feeling toward her. A thousand unconscious touches of tone and

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manner had already revealed his love, and she surmised that he would not speak because of the imminence of this sore danger. She longed to give him her open sympathy, to counsel with him, to lock hands with him so that they might face the trouble together. Yet she was stopped from word or action by the necessity of seeming to know nothing. The fact of Bancroft's identity had been disclosed to her by his wife, her dear and intimate friend, who, at point of death, had told her, under solemn promise of secrecy, the whole story, that she might the better shield Lucy should disclosure ever threaten. Now, her heart melting with pity, love, and sympathy for her friend, and burning with angry resentment against his foe, she must perforce sit in apparent ignorance of it all, be calm and cheerful toward Bancroft, and smile pleased welcome upon Conrad. That hidden volcano in her breast, whose possibility Lucy and Curtis had half seriously discussed, had become a reality, and the concealment of it demanded all her self-control.

The only relief she dared give herself was occasional disapproval of the young cattleman in her talks with Lucy. Louise was surprised and puzzled by the varying moods

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in which the girl received these criticisms. Sometimes she kept silence or quickly changed the subject. Rarely she tossed her head and joined in the condemnation with an angry sparkle of the eye. Or, again, with flushing cheek, she defended him from Miss Dent's aspersions. Louise decided, with a fond smile, that her vagaries of mood were due to pique at the lack of more constant attentions from Conrad. For the young woman, to her father's and Miss Dent's loving amusement, was proving herself adept in the art of queening it over a court of masculine admirers. What with walks over the *mesa*, rides and picnics up the canyon, music of evenings, and Sunday afternoon calls, Lucy was leading a gay life, and Louise, as her chaperon, a busy one. Being a normal, buoyant-hearted girl, Lucy enjoyed the gayety and the attention and admiration showered upon her in such copious measure for their own sake, and she was glad of them also because, together with her household cares, they kept her too well occupied for sad thoughts.

So the days passed until mid-June was at hand and the time come for the trial of José Maria Melgares. Curtis Conrad was in Golden as one of the principal witnesses for the

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prosecution — his first visit to the town since the Spring round-up. Lucy, glancing frequently down the street, was trying to interest herself in Miss Dent's conversation as they sat together on the veranda. They spoke of the trial, and Lucy said she had seen Mr. Conrad on his way to the court-house when she went down town to market.

"I 've been disappointed in Mr. Conrad," said Louise; "I don't understand how he can talk so recklessly about people needing to be killed. To me it is very repellent. You know how he speaks about Mr. Baxter."

Lucy's head went up. "But Mr. Baxter is a very bad man!" she exclaimed. "He has been responsible for a great deal of suffering. Just think of Melgares and his poor wife! But for Mr. Baxter they might still be living happily on their little ranch. And he 's done many other things just as wicked and unjust. Oh, he 's a very bad man, and I can't blame Mr. Conrad for feeling that way about him." She broke off, flushing to her brows, then went on more quietly: "But I don't think, Dearie, that Mr. Conrad means half he says when he talks that way; it 's just his way of feeling how brave he is."

"If he does not mean it, he should not

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speak so recklessly of serious matters," Louise responded with decision. "He must have a cruel nature, or he would not harbor such ideas."

Lucy leaned forward, her face aglow. "Indeed, no, Dearie! Mr. Conrad is n't cruel; he 's really very tender-hearted — just think of the way he carried that wounded bird all the way to Golden to have its leg fixed. And one day when we were walking on the *mesa*, he was so distressed because he accidentally stepped on a little horned toad. It 's unjust to call him cruel, Dearie!"

Her glance darted down the street again, and she saw Curtis nearing her gate. His quick, energetic stride and eager face were like a trumpet call to her youth and her womanhood. Forgetting all but the fact of his presence, she felt her heart leap to meet him with joyful welcome. But instantly came remembrance and reaction, and she greeted him with unusual gravity of manner.

Conrad wanted them at the ranch for the Fourth of July. "We are to have a big barbecue and *baile*," he said. "Both the Castletons are coming this year to look things over, and I wrote Ned that if Mrs. Ned was

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coming with him perhaps it would amuse her if we did something of the sort. The idea seemed to just strike his gait, and he wrote back at once to go ahead and whoop it up for all I 'm worth. Mrs. Ned and Mrs. Turner are both coming, and I 'm asking a lot of people from all over the Territory. I want you two ladies and Mr. Bancroft to be sure to come out the day before the Fourth and stay at least until the day after, and as much longer as you find convenient. My brother Homer is coming on next week for the rest of the Summer, and he 'll be there too."

Lucy was delighted, clapped her hands, and declared it would be great fun — of course they would go. Repugnant to the idea but knowing that only one course was seemly, Miss Dent gave smiling acquiescence. As they talked, Curtis telling them of the great wealth of the Castleton brothers, the rivalry of the two ladies, the dash and beauty and vogue of Mrs. Turner, and the Spanish ancestry of Mrs. Ned, Lucy's eyes continually sought his face. Her spirits began to rise, and soon they were gayly tilting at each other after their usual custom, she all smiles and dimples and animation, and he beaming with

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admiration. They went to the conservatory to see the tanager and presently brought it back with them, telling Miss Dent that they were going to set it free. Lucy stood beside him as they watched it soar away through the sunlight, a flash of silvery pink flame, and it seemed to her that their mutual interest in the little creature had made a bond between them and given her an understanding of his character deeper and truer than any one else could have.

Conrad went down the hill, whistling softly a merry little tune, his thoughts dwelling tenderly upon Lucy. He wished her to enjoy the barbecue and *baile* even more than she expected — it was to be her first experience of that sort — and he began to plan little details that might add to her pleasure. So absorbed was he and so pleasant his thoughts that for a time he quite forgot the Delafield affair. But it came to mind again when Bancroft asked him, as they talked together at the door of the bank, if he had had any more trouble with José Gonzalez.

"Oh, no; José 's all right. He 's the best cowboy I 've got and as docile as a yearling. He 's agreed to stay right on at the ranch with me. I 'm glad to have such a smart,

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competent fellow to leave under Peters, for after the Fourth I expect to be away a good deal. I 'll have some time for myself then and I 'm going into this hunt after Delafield for all I 'm worth; I don't think it will take me long to run him down now."

Bancroft hesitated a moment, then, laying his hand on Conrad's arm he spoke earnestly: "For God's sake, Curt, give up this fool notion of yours. If you don't, you 'll never get through alive. No sane man is going to let you get the drop on him, as you seem to think you can. He 's undoubtedly watching you right along, ready to put an end to the business as soon as he thinks you 're really dangerous. Let him pay you if he will; but stop this foolishness."

Conrad laughed heartily and slapped Bancroft's shoulder. "Why, Aleck," said he, "the most satisfaction I 've ever had comes out of knowing that I 'm so hot on his tracks that I 've got him buffaloed. Give it up? Not much! I 'm going to lope down that trail at a two-minute gait, and Sumner L. Delafield is mighty soon going to wish he 'd never been born."

Bancroft turned half away, with a tighten-

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ing of his lips under his brown moustache. "Very well. I 'll not trouble you with any more advice on the subject. But when you meet with disaster, as you undoubtedly will, you must remember that you 've got nobody but yourself to blame. How 's the trial going?" he asked abruptly.

"Pretty fast; the case will go to the jury to-morrow. It won't take them more than ten minutes to reach a verdict. You ought to come in and hear Judge Banks's charge, Aleck. Dan tells me it 's sure to be interesting. He says you never can tell whether Banks will deliver an original poem or make up his charge out of quotations from Shakespeare."

As the banker went up the hill to his home he remembered that he had heard Rutherford Jenkins was in town. To-morrow he must see the man and try again to induce him to consider the dangers of an indictment for conspiracy. At any rate, he would hold that affidavit of Melgares' up his sleeve, and the time might come when it would be efficacious, even should Jenkins still scoff at it now. Conrad — he had given Conrad another warning, as plain as day, and if the man would rush on recklessly he must take the consequences.

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José Gonzalez was still at Socorro Springs — an accident could happen — and there was no time to lose!

Lucy saw her father coming when he was a block away and, instead of running to the gate to meet him, pretended not to have noticed him, and hastened into the house. Louise Dent remained on the veranda, pushing forward a lounging chair for him as he mounted the steps. She saw that he looked paler and more haggard than usual, and she longed to put her arms about him, as a mother might around a suffering child, and charm away his trouble and wretchedness. In her maiden life the innate mother-longing had found little appeasement; and so, when this youthful love came into her enriched and mellowed heart of middle life, it gathered into itself the repressed yearning of her nature, and the maternal side of it was strong and fierce. She neither condoned nor belittled the sins of the man she loved. For his wrongdoing and the suffering he had caused she felt sorrow, pity, remorse — remorse almost as keen as if she herself had been the guilty one. But her love enfolded him in spite of his sins, and even included them. For she told herself that if he had not been guilty she might never have

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known him, their paths might never have crossed.

In gentle, unobtrusive ways she ministered to his comfort; then, sitting beside him, her calm brow and steady eyes giving no sign of the tumult in her heart, she talked with sympathy and interest, gradually leading his thoughts away from the present into happy plans for the future. With keen satisfaction she saw the weary, desperate look fade from his face and eyes, giving place to one of comfort and content, and the assurance that she had made him forget his troubles, even for a little while, filled her heart with pleasure.

Lucy, sitting in her room, heard the murmur of their voices through her open windows. Her high spirits of the hour before were gone, and she sat dejected, her face mournful, and her head hanging like a flower broken on its stem. Presently she slipped down to the conservatory, took the pot of cactus Conrad had given her, ran across the back-yard, and threw it over the fence. Then she joined her father and Louise, seating herself on the arm of his chair and throwing her arm around his neck as she asked with loving concern about his welfare, told him he had not been looking well of late, and that he

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was working too hard and ought to have a rest. But that evening, after dinner, she rushed across the yard and out of the gate, and gathered up the cactus pot in her arms as if it were some small animal she had hurt. She returned it to its place in the conservatory, pressing her hands around it until its spines brought little drops of blood.

"I can't help it!" she exclaimed in a vehement whisper. "I have to like him, and I shan't try any more not to! He would n't hurt daddy, I know he would n't — because — because he would n't — and because — he loves me!" A tiny smile curved her lips as she touched the plant caressingly and presently her whisper went on: "If I could only tell daddy that he need n't be afraid or worried! Oh, I wish I could! But he must n't guess I know." Her lips ceased moving and she stared unseeingly at the cactus, as her thought slowly took shape: "It 's worrying daddy awfully, and I must n't let it go on any longer. I 'll tell Mr. Conrad who Delafield is and he 'll stop right then — I know he will. He 'll despise us afterward — oh, he won't love me after that! — but — poor daddy! he won't be worried any more."

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Bancroft and Miss Dent were alike convinced that his pursuer would be ruthless in the fulfilment of revenge. Arguing from their knowledge of men, their experience of the world, and their observation of his character, each had come to the fixed conclusion that no softening of heart or staying of hand could be expected from him when he knew the truth. Lucy, having neither knowledge of men nor experience of the world to guide her, had not reasoned about the matter at all. She had jumped at once to her conclusion, as soon as she knew her father's identity, that he had nothing to fear from Curtis. Her decision was partly due to her own temperament, which she instinctively felt to be somewhat akin to Conrad's, and partly to her knowledge of a side of his character of which Louise knew little and her father still less. It was further strengthened by her intuition that he loved her — something the young man himself had not yet realized. Other than this belief in his love she could have offered no reason for her assurance that he would give over his purpose as soon as he learned to whose door his quest was leading him. But neither her father nor Louise, had it been possible for them to argue with her, could have shaken her conviction.

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The next day Bancroft, Conrad, and Pendleton went together to the court-house to see the closing scenes of the Melgares trial. The leading men of the town were there, as well as the usual hangers-on of a court-room, and a few women, both Mexican and American, sat in a little railed space at one side. Every seat was filled, and a standing line of late comers fringed the walls. Across the room Bancroft saw Rutherford Jenkins. The crowd was disappointed by the judge's charge to the jury, which was brief, simple, and confined to bare statements of law and fact. So it sat still and waited after the jury had filed out, feeling sure that the deliberation would not be long, and that something interesting might be expected afterward from the judge; for he had the reputation of doing and saying whimsical things. He was a bookish man, who studied his law volumes much, but for relaxation turned often to romance and poetry. He had a knack for making jingles himself, and his pronouncements from the bench, whether he was charging a jury, calling for order, sentencing a prisoner, or making peace between warring attorneys, were as likely as not to be in rhyme of his own improvisation or in aptly applied quotations from the words of the mighty.

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The jury came back presently with a verdict of murder in the first degree. Judge Banks asked the prisoner if he knew of any reason why the court should not sustain the finding of the jury. Melgares said nothing, and Dellmey Baxter, his counsel, who had made the best fight for the Mexican that he could, shook his head; he had given his services, and cared to take no further trouble. All that now stood between the prisoner and the gallows was a little space of time. The judge looked out of the window into the trembling green depths of the cottonwoods beside the court-house, and for a moment there was silence in the room. He was a slight man, with dreamy blue eyes, and a square, fine face, framed by side-whiskers, short and thin. It was quite like him to be trying to realize, in that brief moment, just how it would seem to have the gallows looming in one's path so short a way ahead.

He ordered the prisoner to stand. Sheriff Tillinghurst, his usual smile absent from his kindly face, helped Melgares to his feet. The Mexican's wife, who had been seated beside him, drooped forward, her breast shaken with sobs and her lips moving in whispers of prayer.

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"José Maria Melgares, you have heard the finding of the jury," began the judge, and waited for the sonorous voice of the court interpreter to send the words rolling in musical Spanish over the room, "and it is now necessary for me to pronounce upon you the sentence of this court. The rains will soon be here; José Maria Melgares, the grass will spring forth, the flowers bloom, and all the plains and hillsides grow green and luxuriant. But you will not be here to see and enjoy their beauty, José Maria Melgares. The rains of Summer, the golden days of October, the storms of Winter, will all alike pass unknown and unheeded over your head. Spring will come again with its new life, and the lambs will frolic beside their mothers and the little calves bleat in the valleys. But your eyes will not see the sights, nor your ears hear the sounds, José Maria Melgares. It will not matter to you that the skies of New Mexico bend blue and beautiful above your head. The stars will march across the midnight heavens, proclaiming that God is good, and that He holds the universe in the hollow of His hand. Day after day the sun will rise in his fiery might and blazon forth upon earth and sky the goodness and the glory of the

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Almighty. The moon will swim across the violet skies of night, wax from slender crescent to fair white disk, and wane again. But to you, José Maria Melgares, it will all be as nothing. For you, life is a tale that has been told; there is nothing more for you now, José Maria Melgares, save the moral, and even that is no longer of interest to you. For you have been guilty of a heinous crime, José Maria Melgares; you have taken the life of your fellow-man, and therefore your life is forfeit. It is the sentence of this court, José Maria Melgares, that you be hanged by the neck until dead. And may God have mercy upon your soul!"

The last melodious syllables of the interpreter's voice resounded through the room, and died in sudden silence. Then the moment's hush was broken by a shriek as Señora Melgares sprang to her feet, stretching her arms out wildly to the judge.

"No, no, Señor Judge! It is not right that my husband should die," she cried out in Spanish. "He was made to steal the mare, and the man who hired him to do it and brought all this trouble upon us — he is the one who should die! There he sits over there! Señor Jenkins, Don Rutherford Jenkins! He

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is the one who made my husband steal the mare, who gave him money to do it, because he had a grudge against Señor Conrad; and he is the one — "

Sheriff Tillinghurst, his hand on her shoulder, was urging her to sit down, her husband was ordering her to stop, and there was a sudden hubbub all over the room. The judge rapped on his desk and threatened to have the room cleared. Jenkins sat quite still, glaring wrathfully at Bancroft. Conrad clenched his fist, his blue eyes blazing as he exploded an oath into Pendleton's ear; it was his first intimation that the man from Las Vegas had been behind the attempted theft of his mare.

Jenkins was waiting for Bancroft at the door of the bank. "I want to see you at once, in private," he said curtly, and without a word the banker led the way to his office. "A nice trick you played me," Jenkins began, his voice hot and sneering. "I thought of going straight to Conrad; and that 's what I ought to have done, to serve you right."

"Well, why did n't you?" Bancroft asked, impassively.

Jenkins took quick alarm. Had the young ranchman, with his impetuous loyalty, told his

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friend what had happened in the Albuquerque hotel? But perhaps Bancroft was only bluffing, in which case he himself could bluff as well as another. "I did n't because I thought it would be the square thing to see you first, and find out if you have any explanation to offer of that woman's performance. Unless you can satisfy me you had nothing to do with it, I shall see Conrad and tell him everything he does n't know about you before I leave town to-night."

Bancroft reflected. If Jenkins approached Curtis in that young man's present mood there was ample likelihood that the blackmailer would never trouble him again. Yet there was the chance that he might say in time to save himself the word that would stay Conrad's hand. He dared not take the chance.

"I advise you," he said slowly, "if you value a whole skin, not to go near Curt Conrad while he is in the state of mind in which I just left him. As for Señora Melgares, are you crazy enough to suppose I had anything to do with that?"

"It 's evident, Bancroft, that you put her up to something you were afraid to do yourself. You wanted to put me in a hole, and you got her to do it for you."

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Bancroft made a gesture of annoyance. "Oh, well, if you 've got no more *sabe* than that—" he began, but went on quietly, "I give you my word of honor—"

"The word of honor of Sumner L. Delafield!" Jenkins sneered.

The banker's eyes flashed as he made an impulsive start, but he went on with quiet emphasis: "I give you my word of honor that I knew no more than you what the Melgares woman was going to say when she jumped up. You ought to see yourself that it would have been to my advantage to keep this knowledge entirely in my own hands."

"Nevertheless," Jenkins replied sullenly, "you could have prevented her outbreak if you 'd wanted to; and if there are any legal proceedings started against me because of what she said I expect you and Dell Baxter to stop them at once. And I want you to give me, before I leave this room, a sum of money or a check equal to what I receive on the first of every month. And understand that this has no connection with that payment, which will come on the first of next month, as agreed. It 's little enough, after this outrage."

Bancroft glared at his companion for a

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moment; Jenkins sat up with a defiant look and glared back. The banker turned to his desk and wrote the check without a word. "And the woman's charge?" the other asked threateningly, as he took it.

"If any action is begun I'll do my best to stop it."

Well satisfied with the result, Jenkins hastened down the street, intending to cross over to his hotel at the next bridge and wait in the privacy of his room until train time. As he approached the court-house corner Sheriff Tillinghurst, Little Jack Wilder, Pendleton, and Conrad came out of the building. Curtis saw the hurrying figure, and the light of battle leaped into his eyes. He rushed past the others, and before Jenkins had time to draw his revolver was upon him and had pinioned his arms.

Pendleton ran forward, shouting, "Give it to him, Curt! He deserves it!"

"Jack," smiled the sheriff, "I reckon this is goin' to be a sure good scrap, but we don't need to see it. We'd better hike." And they disappeared up the side street.

Jenkins was vainly struggling to reach his hip pocket. Conrad got him down, set one knee on his chest, plucked forth the gun, and

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threw it to Pendleton. "Now, you damned skunk," he exclaimed, "you 're going to get every lick that 's coming to you! I won't dirty powder by using my gun on you, but I 'm sure going to set the standard for lickings in this town."

And to this day, in the city of Golden, the pummelling that Rutherford Jenkins forthwith received is spoken of as the utmost measure of punishment that a man may take and live. At the end Conrad took the limp body under one arm and carried it to the physician's office. "Here, Doc," he said, "is some work for you. Send the bill to me."

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CHAPTER XVIII

PLOTS AND COUNTERPLOTS

FOURTH of July was at hand, and Lucy Bancroft made ready for their stay at the Socorro Springs ranch with a resolve in her heart. Some time during their two days' visit she would tell Curtis Conrad the truth about her father. Of course, many people would be there, and the superintendent would be busy, but she expected to see a good deal of him — he was sure to show her much attention — and it would not be hard to find the few minutes of privacy in which to impart the secret. She was quite sure that the knowledge would bring to a harmless end his long quest of vengeance, and that at once he would cease his pursuit of Delafield. But she was equally sure that he would no longer love her or be friendly with her father. "He can't respect either of us after that," she mused. "He 'll feel toward us just as he does toward Mr. Baxter; and I can't blame him, for we 're worse than Mr. Baxter is." Her heart pleaded

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eagerly for a little period of grace in which to feel his love and live it, to take delight in his favor and admiration. She need not tell him at the outset.

While Lucy was considering and deciding upon her action, on the morning before the Fourth, Mrs. Ned Castleton was saying to her husband in the privacy of the great, empty plain across which they were taking an early gallop:

"I know why Lena was so willing to come down here with Turner and us. You 'd never guess, Ned."

"Of course I could n't, Francisquita. So you 'll have to tell me."

"I know I shall have to, for you 'd never discover it yourself, until too late to do anything about it. She did n't come because she wanted to see the place, — though she 's never been here before, you know, — nor because she thought it would be something unusual to do, nor because she cares any more about Turner's affairs than she did last year, nor even because she wanted to keep track of me, nor because — "

"Never mind the did n'ts, Fanny! Let 's skip ahead to why she did."

"That 's just like you, Ned. You never

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can understand what a flavor it gives to something that really *is* to consider first all the things that it *is n't*."

"Well, you 've had the flavor, now you can give me the fact. I 've wondered myself why she was so gracious about coming with us."

"Yes; was n't it surprising? It puzzled me so that I could n't give up thinking about it until I solved the mystery."

"And are n't you going to let me into the secret?"

"Of course I am, Ned; that 's what I 'm doing right now! I studied about it on the way here, and I managed to find out a lot of things it was n't. But I did n't discover what it was till after we reached the ranch."

"Well, what did you find out then?"

"Why, Ned, I 'm telling you just as fast as I can! Although I think I know Lena pretty well, and am quite accustomed to her doing things that nobody else would think of, really, Ned, I was so surprised at this freak that you could have knocked me down with a feather!"

Ned Castleton looked caressingly at the slender, graceful figure of his wife, erect upon her horse, and smiled broadly. "Fanny, I 'm

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in that condition right now, from unassuaged curiosity. Please knock me down with a feather and then go on and tell me this deep, dark secret."

She tickled his cheek with her quirt. "Why, Ned, I 've been telling you all about it for the last five minutes, but you won't understand what I mean. It 's all because she 's immensely taken with your handsome superintendent, and she 's deeply interested in the cattle business because she wants him to explain it to her!"

Castleton gave an incredulous laugh. "Nonsense, Francisquita! You are a clever woman, my dear, especially when it comes to divining what your dearly beloved sister-in-law is planning to do year after next. But you two women do get most remarkable notions about each other sometimes."

Mrs. Castleton shrugged her shoulders, tapped her horse, and bounded ahead. They raced for a mile before she allowed him to regain his place at her side. "Granting that you 're right, Francisquita," he said, "what makes you think so?"

"Why, Ned, it 's perfectly plain. I 've seen Lena pave the way for too many flirtations not to know exactly what she 's doing now.

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And she 's preparing to have a perfectly furious affair with Mr. Conrad."

Castleton kept discreet silence for some moments and studied the horizon. When he turned again to his wife he asked, "Well, dear, what are you going to do about it?"

Francisquita Castleton was half Mexican, and on her mother's side could trace descent through a long line of dons back to a valiant governor and captain-general of the province who had done great deeds nearly two hundred years before. Her heritage had dowered her well with the instinctive coquetry, the supple, unconscious grace, the feminine, artless art that are the birthright of the women of Spanish blood. All of it was in the movement of her arm, the turn of her neck, and the poise of her head as she raised her veil and lifted her face toward her husband. Her voice was as soft as velvet and as caressing as an infant's palm as she exclaimed:

"Do anything? I? Why, Ned Castleton, how you surprise me! Why should I interfere with Lena's whims?"

Castleton laughed. "Ask me something easy, Fanny! I 'm sure I don't know why you should, but I 've noticed that Lena's plans

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sometimes shrivel up like a stuck balloon. Of course, it may be mere chance."

"No, Ned; it is n't chance at all. It 's only because Lena does n't plan carefully enough."

He took time for reflection. "I say, Francisquita," he presently broke out, "if you 're right about this — and I must admit you don't often miss it about Lena — it may be a serious matter."

"Of course I 'm right, Ned. You 'll soon see for yourself just how things are going. You know Lena likes admiration and she likes having her own way and she dearly loves making Turner jealous and she 's positively unhappy if every man in sight is n't prancing along in her train. Mr. Conrad is a fine-looking young man, and he made a very good appearance when she saw him in San Francisco last year. I suppose she thought he did n't yield to her fascinations as he should, so she decided to come down here and gather him in. She knows she 'll be awfully bored unless she can make her flirtation with him — well — ardent enough to keep her interested. I know enough about Lena to see that she 's planning to have an affair that will keep her and Turner and Mr. Conrad simply sizzling as long as we stay."

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Castleton gave a long, low whistle. "Turner gets more jealous with every flirtation Lena has, and this whim of hers may prove serious. Conrad is the best superintendent this ranch ever had, and we want to keep him. But if Turner gets jealous he 'll have to go — and mighty quick, too. And if he does n't promptly succumb to Lena's fascinations — well, she 's just vain enough to carry some story about him to Turner, so that we 'd have to let him out for the sake of peace. We can't afford to lose Conrad, Fanny. I 'll propose to Turner that we cut our stay short and go the day after the Fourth. We 'll have to be here for the barbecue, of course."

"Really, Ned, that 's just like a man! Don't you know Lena can't be managed that way? She 'd suspect at once that I was at the bottom of it and wanted to get her away from here, and then nothing could induce her to go. And you know, Ned, she always winds Turner around her finger as if he were a piece of silk. I can't understand why American wives take so much pleasure in managing their husbands; we Mexican women don't care to do that sort of thing." It was a prim little figure that pronounced the last sentence

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— save for the coquettish turn of the head and a melting glance of dark eyes that flashed for a moment upon her husband.

He bent toward her a lover's face. "But you know how to manage just the same, Francisquita, *mi corazon*. Can't you think of some way to head Lena off and get her away before she does any mischief?"

Francisquita turned a contemplative eye upon the forest of crimson-flowered cactus through which they were riding. "Well, I don't know that I can do anything — still, Lena's methods are always so — broad! I suppose I might try, if you 'd like me to. It might have some effect if I stepped in right away — you would n't mind it, would you, Ned? — and did a little flirting with Mr. Conrad on my own account; not very much, you know; but I could manage to keep him busy about things — oh, you understand! — just make it pleasant for him to be with me. Really, Ned, Lena has n't much chance if I start even with her; we 've tried it before — you remember — I told you all about it at the time — and I think she 'll quit right away and want to go home, or somewhere, as soon as she sees what I 'm doing."

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Castleton laughed aloud. "And poor Conrad! What 's to become of him in the midst of all these sighs and glances?"

She threw him a smiling glance, and broke into a little, low laugh. "Oh, he won't mind! He 's no silly! And he does n't care anything about the ladies, anyway."

"But suppose, Fanny," her husband teased, "that he should prefer Lena's methods after all, and cast himself at her feet instead of yours?"

She shrugged her shoulders and turned toward him with a smile trembling at the corners of her mouth. "Oh, in that case he would quite deserve to lose his position."

"But what about me? Should I deserve to lose him?"

She tapped her horse and darted ahead, throwing back a laughing retort: "Of course you would, for not having married a more attractive wife!"

Later in the day Mrs. Ned Castleton was busily engaged with Curtis Conrad and his brother Homer in the grove of cottonwoods across the road from the ranch house, showing them where to hang the last of the Japanese lanterns. Many people had already arrived and were scattered through the grove, or were wandering about the corral. Others

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were in the stockade behind the house, where Red Jack, Nosey Ike, and José Gonzalez were quartering the steer for the barbecue, and Hank Peters and Texas Bill were heaping wood on the fire where it was to be roasted. In the grove long tables had been made of planks and a floor laid for dancing. The lanterns hung in festoons around the platform and depended from the branches of the trees. Conrad saw Bancroft, Lucy, and Miss Dent driving up, and went to meet them.

Mrs. Ned Castleton beckoned to her husband. "I 'm sure Lena is going to do something perfectly outrageous," she said softly as they went to greet the arrivals, "something that will fairly knock us off our feet. She has looked so indifferent and so innocent all day and has been so sweet to me that I 'm expecting a thunder clap every minute. I hope it won't be anything disgraceful."

It was one of Mrs. Ned's important occupations, and she considered it her chief duty, for the sake, as she often told her husband, "of preserving at least a shred of the Castleton reputation," to discover the daring whims of her sister-in-law and nip them in the bud before they were ready to blossom upon the world. Francisquita knew also that Mrs.

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Turner enjoyed saying and doing audacious things, quite as much because they shocked Mrs. Ned as because they gave her a piquant vogue in San Francisco society. "I wonder what it is going to be," she repeated in a whisper to her husband as they came back with Conrad and the Bancroft party and went in search of Mrs. Turner. They found her sitting beside one of the tables, the centre of a group of men. Lucy, looking with interest, saw a large, golden-haired woman in a blue linen gown, that fitted perfectly her well corseted figure, and a blue picture hat, that matched the hue of her eyes. Her complexion of exquisite fairness and delicacy of coloring, and features of perfect regularity and proportion, made Lucy own to herself that she deserved her reputation as "the beautiful Mrs. Castleton."

"What are we going to do all the rest of the day?" Mrs. Turner presently said, hiding a little yawn behind diamond-decked fingers. "It is n't three o'clock yet, and it seems as if it ought to be the day after to-morrow. Let 's go in the house and play I 'm a barber. Mr. Conrad, will you let me shave you?"

A thrill of shocked astonishment went through the group. Lucy dropped her eyes

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and felt her cheeks burn and Miss Dent turned uneasily away. Some of the men looked at one another and grinned; others caught their breath and avoided their neighbors' eyes. Conrad masked a moment's hesitation with a gay laugh.

"I would, with pleasure, Mrs. Castleton, if I had time; but just now I 'm pretty busy. Here 's a lot of fellows with nothing to do, who 'll be delighted to help you amuse yourself."

Mrs. Castleton glanced up at the men with a confiding smile. "I believe it 's really because he 's afraid; and he need n't be, for I do it very well — don't I, Ned?" Her brother-in-law gave gallant, if vague, confirmation, and she went on: "And he knows, for I shave him every time he comes to our house. But there 's too much wind out here, it would dry the lather too quickly; let 's go in the house." She rose, and one of the men hastened to open her sunshade, another picked up her fan, a third her handkerchief, and the statuesque blue figure with its group of satellites left the grove.

"What does it mean, Fanny? Is this a new fad?" Ned Castleton asked his wife. "I never heard of it before, and she took my

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breath away when she told those people she always shaved me."

"You backed her up splendidly, Ned; and I think you 'd better go in now and let her shave you along with the others."

"Fanny! I 'd as soon allow her to black my boots!"

"But if she wants to, Ned! And I don't think she 'd hurt you much, because she 's been practising on their butler for a month — so her maid told mine, though I 'd forgotten all about it. As Turner's brother I really think you ought to go in and seem to join in the fun, so it won't look quite so bad."

"If Lena does n't care about the looks of it, why should I, or you?"

"But you ought to care on Turner's account. It would be dear of you, Ned, if you would go in, for Turner's sake, and lend your countenance to the affair."

"My countenance, Francisquita, but not my face. Since you 're so anxious, dear, I 'll go in and chaperon this shaving party if you 'll tell me the real reason why you want me to do it. Is it a bargain?"

She leaned toward him with a delighted little chuckle. "Don't you see, Ned, that if you go in and I stay out she 'll think that

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I 'm keeping Mr. Conrad out of doors, and she will be so angry about it that it will make her nervous, so she will cut their faces dreadfully, and that will make her freak such a failure that she 'll have to drop it. Do go along, Ned; for I 'm going to keep your manager busy for the next two hours. And, by the way, dear, if you should come out and not see me anywhere, it 's likely to be because he 's asked me to drive to the post-office with him."

She sauntered through the grove toward the pond where a group of people had gathered under a big tree. She knew that Curtis was there, with the Bancrofts. Her cousin Juan—" Johnny "—Martinez was with them, and so was Dellmey Baxter. Dan Tillinghurst leaned against the tree, and beside him were Emerson Mead and his young wife, from Las Plumas. Judge Harlan and Colonel Whittaker, the former with his wife and the latter with his daughter, had also come from Las Plumas, where a political peace of unusual length and stability enabled them to leave town at the same time, and together.

Mrs. Castleton came smiling down the hill and joined in the general talk. But in five minutes the assemblage had broken into little

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groups of two or three, of which she, her cousin, and Conrad made one. She sent Martinez to do some small service for Miss Whittaker, and began to tell Curtis that she feared there were not lanterns enough. Would he come and look at them? As they went back to the grove she suggested that they might get paper bags from the store at White Rock, fill each half full of sand, put a candle in it, and set them in rows wherever there was room for them. She had often seen her native town illuminated in this way on *festa* nights, and the effect was really very beautiful. He thought it a good idea and asked if she would mind driving over to White Rock with him to help select the best sizes and colors. Five minutes later Lucy watched them driving away. "I saw how Mrs. Castleton was manœuvring," she thought with an angry throb of the heart. "But it does n't matter the least bit. I can have quite as good a time with anybody else."

Presently she seemed greatly pleased when Homer Conrad asked if she and Miss Dent would like to see the horses. They made the round of the stables, and went to see the angora goats in their enclosure beyond the corral, and the dog kennels, and the chicken

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yard. They walked across the alfalfa field, and amused themselves in the prairie dog village on the hillside beyond. Lucy was so interested in everything, and said so many bright and pleasant things, and was so vivacious, and looked so pretty with her dimples and her color coming and going and her big brown eyes sparkling, that Homer thought her quite the nicest, jolliest girl he had seen in a long time. He was much like his brother in build, though less sinewy and a trifle fleshier in body; while in manner he was slower and less eager and alert. His eyes showed the same bright blue tint, but their expression was mild and trustful, while his brother's had always a dauntless look, as if challenging the world. His face was of the same general type, but the features were not so strongly marked, although he had the same firm mouth and strong chin. His countenance gave the impression of a character phlegmatic but forceful.

That evening Lucy told Miss Dent that she liked Don Homer very much, adding, "And he's been more polite and pleasant to us this afternoon than Mr. Conrad himself." Mrs. Ned Castleton had applied the Spanish title to the younger Conrad to distinguish him

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from his brother, and the rest had followed her example. Louise was secretly pleased at this dissatisfaction with Curtis, for her aversion to him was so great that she disliked even to see them together. But she reminded the girl that with so many people there he could not pay much attention to special ones. Lucy tossed her head and replied, "He had plenty of time for Mrs. Ned Castleton."

Evening came, and with it a huge white moon that poured upon earth and air and sky a flood of silvery white radiance in which the illuminations at the ranch shone with a mellow, golden glow. Mrs. Ned Castleton sat on the edge of the porch, her guitar in her lap, looking with satisfaction at the rows of paper bags, each containing a lighted candle in its bed of sand, set thickly upon the window-sills, the adobe walls, and the tables in the grove. They were not only effective, but they had enabled her to keep Curtis Conrad out of the hands of her sister-in-law the entire afternoon. Mrs. Turner had only just gone across to the grove, in the belief, subtly engendered by Francisquita, that the superintendent was to be found there, where most of the company had gathered and the dancing was about to begin. She knew, however,

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that he was overseeing the stowing of some cases of beer in the ice house in the back-yard. And she had not forgotten that when he was at their house in San Francisco he had been much pleased by her rendering of Spanish airs on the guitar. "He does n't need to appear in the grove," she thought, "until Lena has had time to engage several dances." She began to play "La Golondrina," and as the sweetly plaintive notes rose higher, Lucy, looking houseward, saw a tall figure vault the wall around the grass plot and disappear in the shadows of the porch, whence came the strains of Mrs. Ned's guitar. A little later she saw them come across the road together, and at once became deeply interested in the talk of Don Homer, her partner, as they made their way to the dancing floor. Lucy danced twice with him, once with Martinez, and once with Emerson Mead before she made it possible for Curtis to speak with her. She knew he had been hovering near more than once, but she would not see him, and appeared always to be gayly interested with her partner.

She gave him only one dance during the evening. But, noting his movements, she had seen with much bitterness of heart that he danced frequently with Mrs. Ned Castleton.

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She began to wonder, with chill doubt in her breast, if she had deceived herself in thinking he cared for her. She had expected to see so much of him; and yet, except for the first half-hour after their arrival, he seemed to have ignored her. She began to realize that she had depended much on her belief in his love when she resolved to tell him the secret of her father's identity. She still had confidence that her words would turn him from his purpose — but it was going to be a hard thing to do!

"Mrs. Ned is just amusing herself," she thought angrily. "She ought to be ashamed — a married woman flirting like that! Well — he's not the only one!" And before the evening was over Homer Conrad had neither eyes nor ears for any one but Lucy Bancroft.

The house was given over to the ladies for the night. The men had a blanket apiece, and all the wide outdoors in which to couch themselves. Some climbed to the flat adobe roof of the house, or to the brush thatch of the stables, while others declared the ground in the grove good enough for them. It was decided by unanimous outcry that the dancing platform should be turned over to Dellmey

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Baxter and Johnny Martinez, the opposing candidates for Congress.

First they all went trooping, each with his blanket stringing over his shoulder, to the kitchen door, where Conrad and the two Castletons dispensed nightcaps of varied concoction. The women heard them talking, story-telling, laughing, and now and then singing a snatch from some rollicking song. When the last light disappeared from within the house, a group of men began singing "Good-Night, Ladies." A round of vigorous applause from the darkened windows rewarded them, and they went on with "Annie Laurie," "Comin' through the Rye," and "How Can I Bear to Leave Thee." Johnny Martinez sang a Spanish love song in a falsetto voice, and received much applause from within.

The men sang their way along the windows, up one side of the long, rambling house, across the front, and down the other side. They climbed to the roof, and serenaded the men who were trying to sleep there, varying the line or two of song accorded to each with much chaffing and guying. When the last straggling half-dozen of singers finally went off to seek their own resting-places in the

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grove, they marched in single file round and round the dancing floor, where Baxter and Martinez had already stretched themselves, and sang in a solemn croak: "John Brown had one little, two little Indian boys; one went to Congress, the other stayed at home."

When peace settled at last over the Socorro Springs ranch house it was near the dawn of another day.

(A. L. A. — A. R. C. — U. S. O.)
To the Armed Forces and Merchant Marine

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CHAPTER XIX

THE WORD UNSPOKEN

THE sun was high in the brilliant blue heavens and blazing hot upon the gray-green plain when the company came together in the grove the next morning to listen to speeches. One or another well-known resident of the Territory was called forth, with applause and cheers, to mount an improvised rostrum, where he complimented the ladies, chaffed the men, told funny stories, submitted to guying from the audience and repaid it in kind, until he was able to turn a joke upon some one else so deftly that he could retreat under cover of the hand-clapping and laughter and the calls for the other man to step up and defend himself.

At dinner they spent a jovial hour. Half a dozen cowboys carried the big platters of roasted meat to the tables, where they were flanked by smoking dishes of *frijoles* and *chile con carne*, platters of bread, and piles of

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roasted potatoes and hard-boiled eggs. Pails of lemonade and bottles of beer, just brought from the ice house, were scattered down the tables, and steaming pots of coffee and tea passed from hand to hand. Everybody was in the highest spirits; every jest or bit of fun was caught, bandied back and forth, and passed on with new trimmings. As they gathered around the tables, Conrad asked Lucy Bancroft to save a seat for him beside her. She smiled at him without replying; but when Homer presently came and asked for the vacant place she gave him a gracious welcome.

Conrad, much occupied with his duties as host, soon saw that his brother was at her side, paying her devoted attention, and that apparently she was quite happy. "It 's all right," he thought. "He 'll have time to look out for her better than I could, anyway; she seems to be having a good time, and that 's the main thing." Yet he was conscious of keen disappointment; he had seen so little of her — much less, he was suddenly aware, than he wished. But he had been very busy. Notwithstanding the planning beforehand, something new had been constantly cropping up and demanding his attention. But Homer

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had been taking good care of her, and she seemed to be enjoying everything. That evening, after the fireworks, he could surely let things go for a little while, and ask her to walk with him in the moonlight to the top of the hill.

At that moment he was passing Mrs. Turner Castleton. With an inviting smile she made room for him beside her. He sat down, poured her a glass of lemonade, and then, noticing that Emerson Mead and his wife were not comfortably seated, went off to look after them. Mrs. Ned, who had seen her sister-in-law's manœuvre, asked him to go into the house with her to see how the lemons were holding out. When they came out she protested that she was starving, that he must be too, and could n't they sit right down and have something to eat? The seats she chose were at some distance from Mrs. Turner, though directly in range of her eye. They chanced also to be in plain sight from where Lucy was sitting. She, seeing them dining together on such friendly, jolly terms, was more charming than ever to Homer Conrad. Her pique made the task she had set herself no easier; but she held to her determination, telling herself that, even if Curtis did not

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show her some attention that afternoon, she would try to see him in the evening. For they were to go home in the morning.

After dinner the games began. Cowboys of the ranch and others from small neighboring ranches gave exhibitions of quick roping and throwing and of broncho busting. Curtis Conrad and Emerson Mead had a riding and shooting match. José Gonzalez, dressed in Mexican holiday attire of straw sombrero, braided jacket, and close-fitting trousers, showed his skill as an expert lasso thrower. He made a picturesque figure as he stood in the roadway, striking graceful attitudes and making his rope leap, run, circle, and swirl about him as if it were alive. The visitors crowded to the edge of the grove, watching and admiring.

"He's a sure peach at the fancy racket," said Dan Tillinghurst, "but I reckon Emerson Mead can flirt gravel faster than he can when it comes to the real practical business. Say, Emerson," he called, "can't you give us an imitation of the way you slipped out of Antone Colorow's rope and broke his wrists before he had time to draw his noose? I reckon that was a show sure worth seeing."

Those who knew the story added their

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voices, "Yes, Mead; show us how you did it!" Others who had never heard of the incident wanted to know about it; and soon everybody was talking about how a cowboy once tried to rope Emerson Mead. Mrs. Turner Castleton was standing beside Curtis.

"Really, Mr. Conrad," she said, "is it true that they ever rope men? And why do the men allow it?"

"Sometimes, Mrs. Castleton, when the men who are roped can't help it." With a sudden smile he threw back his head and his eyes flashed. "We 'll show you the game," he went on; "José shall try to rope me, and I 'll see if I can keep out of his way. Come, José, get your horse, and bring mine, and then do your best."

The Mexican stooped to coil his rope. As he rose his glance darted across the faces of the crowd under the trees until it met the eyes of Alexander Bancroft, standing beside Dellmey Baxter, at the end of the long group. Baxter saw the two pairs of eyes meet and hold each other for an instant, and his curiosity was aroused. But he seemed to notice nothing, and saying, "Come, Aleck, let 's go and see what they 're up to now," he led the way to the upper end of the grove.

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The two horsemen cantered out into the open and began their manœuvres. The people crowded along at the edge of the shade, and some of the men stepped out into the sunlight to get a better view. Emerson Mead was much interested and walked out farther than the rest. The snakey rings and lengths of the Mexican's rope were whistling through the air, and the two men were wheeling, stopping, rushing forward, jumping sidewise, in graceful evolutions. The noose circled through the space between them, poised over Conrad's head, and darted downward like some voracious bird of prey. An exclamation ran through the intent crowd, "He's got him! He's got him this time!" But the superintendent jerked his horse to its hind legs, swung it to one side, galloped a little way, and came back laughing. "Good! that was first rate!" Emerson Mead called out.

José wound his rope for another trial, and cantered leisurely back and forth, making sudden feints of throwing and watching his employer's movements of evasion. Suddenly he wheeled, charged, and threw the loop from a distance of only a few paces. He had calculated on the other's spurring forward to escape; instead Conrad brought his horse to

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a standstill, and the noose fell over its ears. A cheer went up from the grove, and Curtis turned to wave his broad-brimmed hat. In the one swift glance he was aware of Lucy, watching so eagerly that she had stepped forward into the sunshine, and of his brother, raising a sunshade over her head.

Gonzalez also waved his sombrero to the company, and coiled his rope anew. It darted out like a serpent's tongue, and this time it caught Conrad unawares; he had thought his antagonist would not throw so soon and for the instant was off his guard. The noose fell over his head just as his horse was at midbound. He heard it whistle as it dropped past his ears, and as quick as a flash jerked his pony backward to a sudden stop. Apparently José had expected the horse to leap forward, for, as he felt the slacking of the rope, there was a dextrous turn of his wrist, and a dig of his spur that sent his pony dancing to one side. The noose tightened around Curtis's neck. Instinctively he clutched it, and his fingers, caught against his windpipe, ground into his own throat.

"The greaser did that on purpose!" exclaimed Emerson Mead in a hard, swift undertone, as his hand gripped the revolver at his

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waistband. But Gonzalez was already beside Conrad, and lifting the noose from his neck. The American choked and gasped for breath once or twice.

"You — you caught me square that time, José," he said.

"We are even now, señor," replied the Mexican; "you gave me my life once, and now I give you yours. It would have been only a second more; and it was plainly an accident; nobody would have known. I have paid my debt."

The people were cheering. Both men faced toward the grove and waved their hats. "You damned impudent coyote!" said Curtis through his teeth. Then he grinned, and added, "But I like your nerve, though."

At the grove side the manager threw his bridle to the Mexican, but turned impulsively and called, "Here, José, wait a minute. I want you to show these people how you can throw the knife." A stride or two took him to José's side. "And I'll be your target, damn you!" he added in an undertone. He walked back where Lucy, Miss Dent, and his brother were standing, humming a stave or two from a comic opera under his breath. Homer noticed that his face was rather pale

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and that his eyes were blazing, but thought it due to his annoyance at having been roped.

Gonzalez came back from the corral, carefully testing with his finger the edge and point of his knife. Conrad, his head held high, a smile on his face and exhilaration in his manner, was telling the company to stand a little to one side, to make sure they were out of the way of the knife. As Gonzalez came up, he stepped in front of the nearest tree, with the Mexican facing him ten or twelve paces distant. Judge Banks called to him to watch out for the knife himself, and he turned a smiling face for an instant as he answered gayly, "Oh, I 'm all right!" In the same tone he called, "Start her up, José! And remember, you 're to do your level best."

José's teeth shone in a gleaming smile as he replied significantly, "I shall, Don Curtis!" He took an alert, graceful posture, one foot set back and head thrust slightly forward. The muscles of his arm were still relaxed as his knife slid along his wrist and nestled into place. Conrad drew himself up tensely and his eyes narrowed as he fixed them upon the Mexican's. For an instant they eyed each

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other; then, like a flash, José's arm swung back.

Not until that moment did any member of the company understand that Curtis was deliberately making himself a target; even then many did not realize the significance of the game with death he had set himself to play. Ned Castleton's face went white, and his voice died in his throat as he tried to call to José to stop. Alexander Bancroft stared with devouring eyes, his breath coming hard. The overmastering desire for freedom and safety was upon him, and he could not take his gaze from the Mexican's poised figure. Louise Dent, beside him, drew one gasping breath and covered her face with her hands. Afterward she knew that she had not done this so much to shut from her eyes the next moment's expected sight as to hide from her soul's vision the glimpse she had caught of the desire springing to life in her own heart.

Homer Conrad, sitting beside Lucy, his attention fixed upon some small damage to her fan which he was trying to repair, did not see what was going on until a sudden stiffening of her attitude and a sharp, indrawn breath made him look up. She was leaning forward, with face white and eyes staring and

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"LIKE A FLASH JOSÉ'S ARM SWUNG BACK, . . . AND CURTIS SPRANG LIGHTLY ASIDE AS THE KNIFE STRUCK DEEP INTO THE TREE"

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hands clenched against her breast. He followed her gaze and saw the knife flash from José's hand. His heart went sick and he sat powerless to move as his eyes marked the long blade, dark against the sunshine, but with little sparkles on its edge, through what seemed an interminable flight.

Then Curtis sprang lightly aside as the knife struck deep into the tree at the level of his throat, pulled the weapon out, waved it at Gonzalez, and called out triumphantly, "Try again, José; and be quicker next time!"

Ned Castleton sprang forward, with Turner close behind, and grasped his arm. "Are you crazy, Curt?" he exclaimed. "This is fool's play! We don't want any more of it!"

"There's no danger," Conrad replied jauntily. "I knew I could jump quicker than he could throw, and I wanted to prove it to him. There's not a bit of danger; I can do it every time. But if you don't like it we'll have something else. Hello, kid!" he said as Homer rushed up and seized his arm; the young man's face was pale and tears stood in his eyes. "You've no reason to be frightened," Curtis went on easily. "All I had to do was to watch his eyes. If there had been any real danger I wouldn't have tried it."

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Lucy Bancroft sat quite still for a few moments, her eyes on the ground, but presently she started toward the house, contriving to pass Conrad when there was no one beside him. She touched his arm and he wheeled toward her as if he had felt an electric shock. "It was a most foolish thing to do," she said in a low voice, "but — you are the bravest man I ever saw," and hastened on without giving him time to reply.

At night there were fireworks and dancing. After the knife-throwing episode Curtis tried again and again to have speech with Lucy, but whenever he came near she seemed not to see him, and was so interested in conversation with her admirer of the moment that he could find no opportunity. Homer attended her like her own shadow. The hours hurried past, and still, piqued and wilful, she postponed making the opportunity for her revelation.

Conrad was master of the fireworks; while he was busy setting off sky-rockets and mines Lucy and Homer called to him that they were going to the top of the hill beyond the alfalfa field to see how the display looked from there. It was the very walk Curtis had intended to ask her to take with him, and he

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glanced after them, keenly disappointed. But he said to himself that as soon as he could get the fireworks out of the way there would be nothing to demand his attention for the rest of the evening, and then he could surely get a little time with her.

Half an hour later he saw her, through a glare of red fire, setting off fire-crackers with his brother and Pendleton. Dan Tillinghurst had just joined them, and she turned to him with a laughing threat, a lighted cracker in her hand. He called to Pendleton, whose pockets were bulging with packs of the crackers, to see fair play and give him weapons of defence. The cool night wind was tossing her brown curls, her bright face was full of animation, and the red light enveloped her in a rosy sheen. He looked at her, his face aglow with admiration, then turned back to the sky-rockets. As he stooped over the box he heard a scream in a girlish voice, followed by the stern command, "Sit down! Sit down!" in Dan Tillinghurst's heavy tones. Springing up, he saw a white heap sinking to the ground amid leaping tongues of flame and the three men stripping off their coats and beating the fire. He rushed forward, taking off his coat as he ran,

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and in a moment they had whipped the flames down to a ring of charred muslin and flickering sparks. A dozen others had hurried to the spot, but it was Curtis's outstretched hand that Lucy took as he bent anxiously over her, his arm upon which she leaned as she staggered to her feet. She went at once into the house with Miss Dent, and did not reappear that evening. When Louise returned she explained that Lucy had gone to bed, but that, except for the nervous shock, she had suffered no harm.

Curtis Conrad went on sending off skyrockets and Roman candles in the amaze of a new knowledge. That moment of Lucy's peril, brief as it was, had revealed to him the love that, unconsciously to himself, had been bourgeoning in his heart throughout the Spring. So absorbed had he been in his own grim purpose that he had not realized the meaning of his liking for Lucy and his enjoyment of her society. But in the light of the flames by which he had seen her circled her dearness had flashed upon him its real significance. When she leaned upon him as she arose, it had demanded all his self-control to keep from taking her in his arms. His nerves were thrilling yet with the slight

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pressure of her body upon his arm as she regained her footing. So sudden and forceful was the rush of his emotion that it swept him from his accustomed moorings, and filled heart and mind to the exclusion of every other idea. Lucy — Lucy — Lucy — he said her name over and over in his innermost thought, even while he danced with Mrs. Turner, strolled with Miss Whittaker to the hilltop, — as he had wished to do with Lucy, — talked with Martinez, or listened to Judge Harlan's stories. The thought of her was constantly with him, enveloped in a wonderful tenderness; his memory was incessantly recalling images of her as she looked leaning against this tree, seated beside that table, walking across the road. He hovered around Miss Dent until she, to escape from his attention and his solicitude about Lucy, which intensified the aversion and resentment she already felt, retired to the house early in the evening.

But, when all the merrymakers had gone to bed and quiet had settled upon the ranch, Conrad began to feel a violent wrenching of his heart. When he stretched himself upon the roof of the house and gazed into the silvery violet sky his lifelong purpose reasserted itself. For so many years it had been his

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habit, as he composed himself for sleep, to think over his plans for the pursuit of Delafield and feed his heart with the desire for revenge that he quickly felt its tyranny. For a moment all emotion ceased and his mind stood back, aghast at itself, bewildered. Then the old idea took possession again, and he said to himself, almost with anger, "What business have I to fall in love?" To think of Lucy in connection with his own dark and bloody aims was repellent, and his thoughts turned away in quick reaction. Then came the remembrance of Homer's devotion to her and of how welcome, apparently, had been his attentions. So, for that time at least, Lucy and love were turned out of his heart and his last waking thoughts were of his plan to go to Albuquerque and Santa Fe within a few days, there to run down the clews that promised most.

Because of all that had gone on in his mind and heart as he lay on the roof that night Conrad's manner toward Lucy the next morning was graver and more restrained than usual. He was keenly alive to the magic of her presence, but for that he rebuked himself and went near her no oftener than he could help. Lucy tried in vain to find an opportunity for

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private speech with him. And so the time came for their departure and the fateful words had not been said. "Well," she consoled herself, "he will come to see us in Golden before long, and I will tell him then."

As they drove away the house was filled with the bustle of leave-taking. The guests who had come by rail were being driven to the station at White Rock to catch the forenoon train. Others were leaving by horse or carriage for Golden or Randall. As the dust from the last of the departing vehicles rose in thin gray stains against the vivid blue of the sky Ned Castleton called to his wife from the shade of the tree beside the gate. She had been saying good-bye to the Bancrofts and had stopped in the sun beside the adobe wall to play with a horned toad that Gonzalez had caught for her.

"Fanny," he said, "I know I have n't got horns, but if you 'll come here in the shade I 'll prove that I can be just as interesting as that toad."

She came, holding the weird little creature on her palm. "Look at him, Ned! Is n't he cunning? He 's the dearest thing I ever saw — except you."

"Oh, thanks; it 's kind of you not to put

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me in the same class. As a reward I 'll tell you some news. Your little scheme for balking Lena's designs on Conrad has succeeded perfectly. Turner has just told me that she has suddenly decided she wants to go to Santa Barbara at once, and they 're leaving this afternoon. I told him to go ahead, and I 'd stay here a few days longer and finish things up with Curt."

"That 's just splendid, Ned! We 'll have some lovely rides, won't we? And it will be such a rest not to have to keep an eye on Lena. I felt sure last night that she was going to give up the game and pretend she had n't been playing, because she suddenly lost all interest in the cattle business."

"Of course you know, Francisquita, that you have been behaving shamelessly; but I 'll forgive you, because you 've saved our model superintendent for us."

"Ned, you know very well that I did n't do a thing but just help Mr. Conrad make it pleasant for all the people — except, perhaps, Lena. I 'm afraid she 'd have had a better time if I had n't been here. But I 've been thinking this morning, Ned, that maybe it was n't necessary for me to help quite as hard as I did. What do you think about it?"

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"I think I don't know what you're talking about. As the cowboys say, you've flung gravel along the road a little too fast for my gait."

"Ned, you're the blindest thing! What could I mean except that Mr. Conrad didn't need to be distracted from Lena, especially as her methods are so broad?"

"Well, go on, dear. We'll get there after a while."

"Go on! Why, Ned, that's all! Is n't that enough? Why should a man want more than one pretty girl to protect him from the designs of a lady who — well — who wants to shave him? You never needed anybody but me."

"True, Fanny! But you always were equal to an army in yourself, and now you are equal to two — which is only another way of saying that you grow more fascinating every day. And now I think you might be gracious enough to tell me what you're talking about."

"Why, Ned, I'm afraid Miss Bancroft did n't enjoy it any more than Lena. I was n't quite sure of it until this morning; but I really think, Ned, that Lena would have been left out in the cold just the same if I had n't

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— had n't helped Mr. Conrad entertain the people quite so much."

Castleton laughed. "Oh, I begin to see! You are feeling the pangs of remorse because you 've been putting snags in the course of true love. But you need n't worry, dear. Curt is n't the sort of man, if he cares anything about her, to let a little thing like that make any difference."

"But he 'll be too busy with you to go over to Golden and see her again for a long time, won't he?"

"Oh, we can get through this week, I think."

"Good! Then we can leave on Saturday, and on Sunday he can gallop over to Golden, and by that time she 'll want awfully to see him and she 'll be very sorry she flirted so outrageously with Don Homer. And next Fall we 'll send them a wedding present, and they 'll come to see us on their wedding journey, — she 's a dear, sweet girl, Ned, and I like her, — and I 'll explain to her why I — why I helped Mr. Conrad make things pleasant at the barbecue, and we 'll have a jolly laugh over it. There he is now, Ned! Do go right along and begin your work, so we 'll be sure to leave on Saturday."

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When Conrad bade the Castletons good-bye at the railway station at the end of the week, Francisquita said to him:

"When you see that pretty Miss Bancroft again—" here she gave him a significant glance and then demurely lowered her eyes —"please tell her that I hope to see her again, and that if she ever comes to San Francisco she must let me know—you can give her our address. We'd be delighted, Ned and I, to help her have a good time. She's a dear, lovely girl and I'd really like to know her better."

Curtis drove home, declaring to himself that Mrs. Ned was one of the most charming women he knew. He would ride over to Golden to-morrow afternoon and deliver her message. He lingered fondly over the image of Lucy's slender figure standing at the top of her veranda steps and smiling upon him a gay and gracious welcome, and a strong desire rose in his heart to know just how glad she really would be to see him. But the recollection of his plans for the ensuing week came crashing through his pleasant thoughts like a runaway horse through a flower garden. For a moment the purpose that held his life in thrall seemed strangely

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unworthy. But presently he jammed his hat down on his head and, with compressed lips, said savagely to himself:

"No; the Delafield affair is my first love, and I 'll stay with it." As he thought over his plans and hopes for the immediate future his heart grew hot again with the old indignation over all that ruin and struggle, and the old purpose regained its accustomed vigor.

After a little, nevertheless, he decided that he would ride over to the Bancrofts' the next day and deliver Mrs. Castleton's message. It would do no harm for him to see Lucy occasionally, in the friendly way in which they had always met.

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CHAPTER XX

NARROWING THE QUEST

THAT evening, while they sat and smoked on the little porch, Curtis Conrad told Homer of his lifelong quest. It was the younger man's first knowledge of the motive that had been so potent in his brother's life. He listened in silence while his pipe went out, and sat quite still after the other ceased. "Well, Curt," he said at last, with a little tremor in his voice, "this yarn of yours knocks me silly. I can't say I 'm pleased with it, at least at first view. It does n't seem sensible."

Curtis laughed good-naturedly. "Very likely, Homer; I did n't expect it to appeal forcibly to a sensible, practical chap like you. I have n't told you before because there was no use bothering your young head with it when the round-up seemed so far away; but I 'm mighty near the end of the trail now, and you 've come to a man's age and ways of thinking; so I thought it best to tell you.

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There 's a possibility, of course, that I 'll get the worst of it when the mix-up does come; and in that case I 'd like you to know what it was all about. But I 'm not considering that sort of chance as likely to happen."

"But what do you expect to gain by it, Curt, and why do you want to kill the man?"

Curtis slowly lighted a fresh cigar. "Well, Homer, if you don't see why, it 's no use for me to explain."

"I know there 's a big difference between us temperamentally; but I don't believe that would keep me from appreciating your motive if it had any basis in right or expediency. Good God, Curt, look at the thing sensibly! Suppose you kill the man when you find him. What earthly good will that do you? You 'd probably hang for it, or go to the penitentiary for years. And it seems to me the chance is all the other way. Whoever the man is, he must know you 're after him; and you 'll find him ready and loaded. If you 're not killed you 're likely to be badly wounded — perhaps lose an eye or a leg — and what can you gain by it? Bless me if I can see any use or sense or right in the whole business."

Curtis Conrad rose and walked slowly and

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with bent head the length of the porch and back, his hand resting for an instant on his brother's shoulder as he passed. He stood regarding abstractedly the lightning that was playing among some low-lying clouds above the Hatchet Mountains, far to the southwest. "One night, soon after father and mother died," he began, in a tone so low that Homer could barely catch his words, "I lay awake almost all night, thinking. You were a little shaver barely out of kilts, the girls were young things with their dresses half way to their knees, and I was only fifteen. I had taken you into bed with me because I was afraid you 'd wake up in the night and feel lonesome — and, perhaps, because I did n't want to feel quite so lonesome myself. I made plans for hours about how we could get along and the things I meant to do. You tossed in your sleep, and threw one of your hands against mine. My fingers closed over it, and you gripped one of them fast. Somehow, that grip went to my heart, and I promised myself and you that I would do all I could to make up to you the loss we had suffered. I thought of what father had planned for me; and I knew that I should have to give all that up. As I thought of the man

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who had robbed us of everything — money, opportunity, father and mother — I trembled with anger.

"I had never used an oath until that night. But I sat on the side of my bed, when I could n't lie still any longer, and clenched my fists and cursed him, mildly at first and under my breath, then aloud and in the reddest language I could think of. As I damned his soul to the hottest corner of hell it seemed to me that he ought to be made to suffer in this life, too, and I said aloud, 'I would like to kill you!' The words sounded so plain that they frightened me. But I said them over again, and the next moment the thought leaped up, 'And I will, too, if I live!' That was how the idea was born in my mind. It struck root and grew, and I 've held to it ever since."

Homer nodded. "Yes; I can understand how you would hold to a thing you 'd made up your mind to do; I 'd hold on just the same way. We 've both got the bull-dog grip; it 's one of the Conrad characteristics. But even a bull-dog can let go when he knows he should n't hold on any longer."

Curtis smiled grimly. "Not always; sometimes you have to pry his jaws loose.

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Nevertheless, I could let go if I wanted to. But I don't want to, and I don't propose to. The thing has become part of my life, of me, of my very blood."

"Have you been working at it all this time, Curt?"

"Oh, of course I could n't do much while I was a boy except to think and brood over it. But during that time I learned all I could about Delafield, his schemes, and his personality. I read every newspaper I could lay hold of that had anything in it about him; I 've got them all yet. But I did n't do much in the way of actually chasing him down until after the girls were married ten years ago. After that I earned and saved more money, and was free to go about as I wanted. Since then I 've spent all the time and money I could spare in hunting him.

"I had a schoolmate named Littleton who became a detective when he grew up. We were good friends, and when he happened to find out that I was nosing around in my own way he offered to help me. I was to pay him what I could, and he would put in time on this when he had nothing else to do. Between us we tracked Delafield all over the West and

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into Canada, back and forth, and under nearly a dozen different names. I don't think he got as much money out of his Boston smash as he was charged with taking, but he got a good lot; and he 's since made and lost two or three good-sized fortunes. Most of the time he has been a mining expert, and has owned and dealt in mines; the fact that he 's stuck pretty close to that business has made it easier to follow him. Once, in Arizona, we lost the trail completely. It was as if the earth had opened and swallowed him; for a while we thought he must be dead. Later we discovered his tracks in Utah, under a new name. Since then there have been several gaps of that sort; but we 've always managed to light on him again after a while.

"My last knowledge of him is that he is living somewhere in this Territory, a well-to-do and respected citizen, prominent in politics, and a supporter of Dellmey Baxter for Congress. The rest of it will be easy; there 'll be a quick chase and an early show-down before there 's time for another deal. I 've got my eye on two men, both of whom fit that description. They live up North, and I 'm going up to Albuquerque and Santa Fe next week to look up their records. If it 's either

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one of them, Delafield will meet his deserts before he 's many days older."

Silence fell upon them. Curtis leaned against a pillar of the porch and watched the clouds rising higher over the mountains. "It looks as if the rainy season was about to begin at last," he said in a matter-of-fact way. Homer rose and stood with a hand on his shoulder. They looked so much alike in the moonlight that at a little distance it would have been difficult to say which was the younger and which the elder brother.

"I don't need to tell you, Curt," he said in a tone rich with earnest feeling, "how grateful I am for all you 've done for me, nor how well I know at what cost to yourself you 've done it. You 've been father and mother and brother and best friend to me all in one. If I ever do anything worth while the credit will be yours quite as much as mine. You know I 'm not ungrateful or unappreciative, don't you, Curt? I can understand how this thing has come to obsess you, since you 've explained how it took root in your mind before your ethical ideas were settled. But I can't sympathize with you in this search after vengeance, and I can't approve of what you are planning to do. It

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seems to me you ought to be able to see things straight by this time and shake off your obsession. If you want to find the man and hand him over to the proper authorities — that 's all right; I 'd help you in that myself; it 's right that he should be punished and made to give up what he has to his creditors. But to take revenge into your own hands, Curt, and to take it at the cost of everything desirable for yourself — why, the thing is so mad that it bewilders me to think it 's you that 's doing it. I wish I could persuade you to give it up."

Curtis shook his head emphatically. "You need n't waste your breath, Homer. I rather hoped you 'd understand better how I feel about it, and see the whole affair a little more as it looks to me. But you 're different; and if you can't, you can't, and that 's all there is about it. But it 's useless to try to persuade me to give up my plans. A thing that you 've thought about and dreamt about and planned and worked for through fifteen years gets to be part of your very blood, my boy, and it 's not so easily cast aside."

"Well," said Homer, "you are you; and if you 've got to do this thing I suppose it can't be helped." He paused, thinking

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intently. "But when you go North next week — if one of those men proves to be Delafield — you won't — at once —" He stumbled over his words, unable to put his brother's purpose into plain speech.

Curtis took up his meaning. "No; not immediately. I've got to come home again first."

"Then you'll be back here before you do anything? That's sure, is it, Curt?" asked Homer, relief in his voice.

"Yes; sure. I've got some important business that I promised the Castletons I'd attend to the week after, and I'll take no chances till I get that fixed up for them."

The next morning there was a promise of rain in the air and the sky. A dome of pale, bright gray, resting on murky supports of cloud, had taken the place of the usual heaven of vivid blue. But the wind, blowing warm and strong from the west, bore little moisture upon its wings, and the air was laden with an electric tingle that stretched and jarred unaccustomed nerves.

Hank Peters and José Gonzalez were working in the corral when Curtis Conrad came across from the door of his room to give them some directions. Presently he asked if they

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or any of the boys had seen anything lately of the gray wolf that had skulked about the neighborhood earlier in the season. Nosey Ike, they said, had seen it only the day before in the second draw on the road toward Golden.

"He did?" exclaimed Curtis. "I 'm going to Golden to-day, and perhaps I can get a crack at it. I 'll be home by six o'clock, Peters, and I want to talk with you to-night about some work at Adobe Springs to-morrow. But to-day 's Sunday, boys, and we 've come finally where we can stop and take breath once a week. You fellows can do anything you like to-day."

Peters thought he 'd sleep all day, for he had n't caught up since the barbecue; but José wanted to visit a Mexican family who had a little ranch beside a spring on the road to Golden.

"All right," said the superintendent. "Take whichever one of the ponies you want, but be sure to get back to-night."

"Curt," said Homer when they sat down to breakfast, "if you 're not going to use Brown Betty to-day, would you mind if I rode her over to Golden? Or would n't you like to go with me? I 'm going to call at the

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Bancrofts' to see if Miss Bancroft has recovered from the shock she had the other night."

Curtis hesitated a moment as he poured their coffee, his own plan rising before him invitingly. But he remembered how pleased the two young people had seemed to be with each other and recalled his own resolution: "Let the lad have a fair field," he thought.

"Brown Betty? Certainly, Homer," was his reply. "I 'll see that she 's ready for you. I can't go because I must ride down to Adobe Springs to see about some work the boys must do there to-morrow. Give my regards to the Bancrofts. By the way, Mrs. Ned Castleton gave me a message for Miss Bancroft that I 'll let you deliver."

As Homer mounted for his journey he cast an anxious glance at the wet-looking clouds against which rose the purple-blue, statuesque masses of the Mogollon Mountains, and asked, "Is it going to rain?"

"It will sure rain in the mountains," replied his brother, "if it is n't pouring down by the bucketful there already. There may be a shower in Golden, but the creek will get on the rampage anyway, and maybe carry away some of the bridges. We shan't get

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any here right away, but it 's coming, thank God! I tell you, Homer, it 's been a cruel thing to see the cattle dying like flies on account of the drouth. For a while last Spring I thought of throwing up this job, I hated so to see the suffering of the poor brutes."

For a while all the man in Curtis Conrad clamored in revolt as he galloped southward across the silent, empty plain and thought of Lucy smiling a welcome from her veranda steps — and not upon him. His love called imperiously, demanding that he make trial of its strength. Should he give up the girl he loved without an effort, even though his rival be his brother? The primeval man in him was quick with the desire to take her in his arms and bear her away from all the world. But it was not long until he was saying grimly to himself, "What have I to do with love-making and winning a wife? The Delafield affair is my business, and I 'd better stick to it."

He pondered over the conversation with his brother on the previous evening, feeling more keenly Homer's condemnation of his purpose. He remembered that every one with whom he had spoken about the matter had sought to dissuade him. Bancroft disapproved, and

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had begged him many times to desist. Miss Dent called it unworthy of him. Now his brother, upon whose sympathy he had counted, condemned both his feeling and his intention. Nevertheless, he was surely right. It was easy for them to talk, for they had not suffered from the man's crimes, they had not struggled as he had, and they had not spent years in the effort to find Delafield and cast his sins in his face. But still, his cherished purpose had lost a little of its savor. He thought of his journey northward, which he so ardently hoped would consummate his years of effort and desire, and there was not quite the usual pleasure in his mental forecast. He put the thought of Lucy behind him and went over once more that early struggle and the birth of his purpose, brought more vividly to mind by the talk with Homer, and soon the old ideas and intentions recovered their accustomed sway. By the time he galloped homeward in the late afternoon his indignation was once more hot and seething and his mind full of zest for his approaching journey.

He found Homer in the corral unsaddling Brown Betty and humming a college tune. "Say, Curt, I think I'll go hunting

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to-morrow," said the young man as they walked across to the house. "I want to see if I can't get a shot at that gray wolf you've been telling me about. As I was coming home your Mexican cowboy had sighted it not far from the road, in that valley beyond the hill yonder, and was just about to shoot when I had the bad luck to come along and scare the thing away."

Curtis looked up with quick interest. "José? What was he doing? Did he shoot?"

"He jumped from his hiding-place just as I came along, so suddenly that the mare shied and nearly threw me. He was just ready to shoot — he said the beast was only a little way down the draw — and saw me barely in time to throw up his revolver and send it off at the sky. By that time, of course, the wolf was out of sight. I'm going back there at daybreak to-morrow to see if I can get a crack at it."

Just then Gonzalez came riding into the corral, and Curtis moved his chair to the doorway, in front of his brother. "All right, Homer, I wish you would," he said; "it would be just a tenderfoot's luck, you know, if you should get it." He was rolling a cigarette,

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but keeping one eye on José, who was caring for his horse. "Was there much rain in Golden to-day?" he asked.

"Yes; quite a storm, with lots of fireworks; I never saw such lightning or heard such thunder in my life. There must have been a flood farther up in the mountains, for the creek came down that ravine fairly booming, just as you said it would. It swept away one of the bridges and washed out parts of the foundations of two or three houses. But it soon went down again."

"Was the bank building injured?" Curtis asked, still following with narrowed eyes the movements of Gonzalez. "It 's in a dangerous spot if a really bad flood ever does come down that valley."

"The First National? That 's Bancroft's bank, is n't it? Yes; it lost some bricks out of the foundation, and the ground was washed away a little. Nothing of consequence."

"Well, that has happened several times already; some of these days it will happen once too often. Long ago, I 'm told, the street and sidewalk had to be moved to the other side of the houses for a block or two along there. You remember the creek elbows toward the bank. If a great mass of water

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ever comes down that canyon it will rush straight against the side of the building — and the lives of whoever happens to be inside won't be worth two switches of a cow's tail."

"I talked with Mr. Bancroft about that possibility to-day," said Homer, "and he does n't think the situation is dangerous."

"Yes; nobody in Golden believes there 's any danger. And they may be right. They say there is n't as much rain now as there used to be, and that cloud-bursts of any consequence are as rare as six-legged calves. It will all depend on the weather."

The next morning José Gonzalez was hitching up to drive the men to Adobe Springs when Conrad walked up, leaned carelessly against the wheel, and looked him in the eye. The Mexican returned the gaze unflinchingly but respectfully. "José," said Curtis in a low tone, "you made a mistake about that wolf last night, did n't you? It was n't the wolf you thought it was when you made ready to shoot, was it?"

An amused gleam lighted for an instant José's sombre eyes. "It might have been as you say, Don Curtis," he answered cautiously.

"I don't want any might-have-beens; I want to know if you are making war on my

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brother as well as on me. It 's all right about me, but I won't have anything of the sort where he 's concerned. I want the truth, José. Is anything of the kind going to happen again?"

Gonzalez looked at Conrad squarely as he earnestly replied: "It was a mistake, Don Curtis; I swear to you it was a mistake. Your brother looks much like you, it was your mare, and you had said you would be back from Golden about that hour. I saw it was Don Homer barely in time. After this I shall be more careful."

Conrad grinned at the closing sentence, and the Mexican scarcely repressed an answering smile. "Well, I am going away to-day," said Curtis, "to be gone for several days. So it won't be necessary for you to make any mistakes while I 'm gone."

José looked up in quick alarm. "You are not going to Don Dellmey?" he exclaimed. "He is not the one who wishes your death!"

"What do you say, José?" the other demanded, starting forward eagerly.

"I swear to you by the Mother of God, Don Curtis," said the Mexican, with voice intense and manner most earnest, "that it is not Señor Baxter who desires your death."

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"Are you speaking the truth, José?"

"I will swear it on the crucifix, Don Curtis!"

Conrad gazed at him steadfastly, and the conviction entered his mind that Gonzalez was speaking the truth. A look of puzzled wonder overspread his face. "In the name of God, then, who is it?" he said, half aloud. The Mexican shrugged a shoulder and turned away.

"Who can it be?" the manager repeated, to himself, but still loud enough for the other to hear. "It must be Delafield!" he exclaimed. José's ear caught the words, and he listened as his employer went on: "He knows I 'm after him, and he 's trying to kill me first. If I could only make this *coyote* greaser tell me who his *patron* is, I 'd know who Delafield is. I 'd like to choke it out of you, you son of perdition!" He looked so fiercely at Gonzalez that the Mexican took a threatening step forward.

"You need n't worry," Conrad exclaimed contemptuously. "I know you would n't tell, even if I choked the life out of you trying to make you peach. It 's your *patron* I 'm after." José stooped to hitch the traces, and Curtis broke out impulsively: "I say, José, what

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makes you do this sort of thing? You 're as square as they make 'em in most things; why do you go into this damned rattlesnake business?"

Gonzalez looked up with a confiding smile. "The *patron* wishes it; and why not? If I kill a man he gets me off if he can, and then that is all right. If he can't, I pay for it in prison — and that is fair."

"Huh!" grunted the superintendent as he walked away. "So you think you are going to pay for me that way, do you? Well, I guess not!"

The same train that carried Conrad northward to Santa Fe carried also a brief and hurried letter to Dellmey Baxter which José Gonzalez had found time to write before he and the rest started for Adobe Springs, mailing it as they passed White Rock station.

"You will see Señor Conrad in Santa Fe," the Congressman read in his office the next morning, "but you need not be anxious. I have sworn to him that it is not you who desires his death, and he believes me. I heard him speak to himself, and he said it must be Delafeel who wishes him dead. He said he would like to choke out of me who my *patron* is, for then he would know who Delafeel is.

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Don Curtis is a very brave man. I like him much."

Baxter chuckled over the closing sentences as he tore the letter into bits. Poking them musingly with a fat forefinger he thought: "It 's a sure bet that his *patron* just now is Aleck Bancroft; and that makes it look as if Aleck might be this mysterious Delafeel — I 'll have to find out who Delafeel is and what he 's done some time or other; then I sure reckon I 'll have a cinch on Aleck that will keep him from trying to step into my shoes as long as I want him to keep out." He looked out of his window into the little tree-filled plaza, cool and green in the morning sunlight, and saw Curtis Conrad walking across it from the hotel on the other side. He took a six-shooter from his pocket, made sure of its cartridges, and replaced it. From a drawer in his desk he took another, examined its chambers, and laid it on his desk, under an open newspaper. A moment later he was rising from his chair with outstretched hand and beaming smile.

"Why, how do you do, Mr. Conrad! I 'm sure glad to see you. How did you leave things down in old Silverside? That was a high old time we had at the barbecue, was n't

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it? Have the Castletons gone yet? A fine figure of a woman is Mrs. Turner Castleton! And I tell you right now it was a great shave she gave me!" The Honorable Dellmey Baxter rubbed his cheek, and chuckled. But his right hand rested on his desk, close beside the newspaper which he had apparently just thrown down.

"Mr. Baxter," said Conrad, ignoring the stream of questions and remarks, "some weeks ago I wrote you, saying frankly that I believed you responsible for attempts against my life, made by a Mexican who had come from you to me. I find myself mistaken, and I have come to apologize to you for my suspicions."

"That 's all right, Curt, that 's all right!" Baxter broke in, relief apparent in his countenance. "I 'll admit I felt hurt by your insinuations, but as long as you 've found out you were wrong and are willing to do me the justice of saying so, it 's not worth speaking of again."

"Understand," Curtis went on, "that I 'm not taking back or apologizing for anything else I 've said about you, and I 'm still shouting for Johnny Martinez for Congress."

"Johnny is to be congratulated for having

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your support," Baxter rejoined genially; "I wish I could get it away from him. Has that measly greaser made any more attempts on your life, my dear Conrad? You 're too good a citizen for the Territory to lose in that way."

Curtis smiled carelessly. "I don't think my life is in any danger. No damned greaser will get the chance to stick me in the back when I 've got both eyes shut and one foot tucked up in my feathers, if I 'm onto his game. I don't care anything about José; it 's his *patron* I 'm after."

"His *patron!*" exclaimed Baxter in apparent surprise. "You don't mean to say that José's got a *patron* in that business!" His visitor nodded and the Congressman went on: "You don't say so! I did n't suppose you had an enemy in the Territory. This is interesting! We must get at the bottom of this, Mr. Conrad, for we can't afford to lose you. Have you any idea who 's behind the greaser?"

Curtis considered a moment. He might get some information from Baxter that would help him; it would do no harm to speak cautiously. "Yes, and no, Mr. Baxter. I know who he used to be, but I don't know

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who he is now. His name used to be Delafield, back in the States."

"Delafield — Delafield," mused Baxter. He had got the conversation where he wanted it. "I don't remember having heard that name in New Mexico."

"That has n't been his name for a good many years. Don't you remember the Delafield affair in Boston, some fifteen years ago — Sumner L. Delafield, who made a big spread in the financial world, defaulted, and ran away?"

"Why, of course!" The Congressman brought his fat fist down on the table with a thump. "The Delafield affair! Yes; I remember it, and how Delafield slid out and covered up his tracks completely. And you say he 's living in New Mexico now?"

"Yes; he 's a rich, prominent, and respected citizen of New Mexico. But I have n't discovered which one of 'em, and he does n't want me to find out. My father lost all he had in the smash."

They talked a little longer, and Curtis learned enough about the history of the two men he had in mind to be satisfied that neither of them was the one he sought.

After Conrad went away, Baxter leaned

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back and folded his hands across his waistcoat, his left eyelid drooping and his face beaming with smiles. "Now," he thought, "I've got Aleck Bancroft exactly where he can do me the most good!"

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CHAPTER XXI

THE SILENT DUEL

AS July sped on Homer Conrad's visits to Golden grew more and more frequent. When Curtis returned from his northern journey, still ignorant of Delafield's identity, Homer was greatly relieved, and tried once more to dissuade his brother. "Anyway, Curt," he urged, "don't do anything more about it now. Let it rest a while, and think about it more coolly and carefully; you 'll see how foolish it is if you do that." As Curtis did not mention the subject again, he concluded that his advice had been taken and that there was no reason for immediate anxiety. His mind at rest on that score, he devoted himself more than ever to Lucy Bancroft. He talked of her so much to his brother that Curtis soon saw how complete was his absorption. "I guess they 're hitting it off together all right," he concluded.

Curtis Conrad tried to accustom himself to the idea of Lucy as his brother's wife. It

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cost him many a painful twinge, and once the rebellious thought came into his mind, "If it had n't been for the Delafield affair I might—" But a little shock, as if he had fallen away from some ideal or been guilty of an irreverence, stopped the notion. Now and then, too, he had misgivings as to what Lucy would think of him if she knew. He shrank from the feeling that her condemnation would be as unsparing as his brother's, with more of horror and disgust. For the first time he began to think about what might lie beyond that longed-for meeting with Delafield. One day, musing upon Homer and Lucy, he had a sudden vision of himself as a commiserated kinsman, and smiled grimly as he reflected, "It might be a good thing for them if I got my quietus in the scrimmage."

These signs of a change slowly going on within him sometimes came as a flash of feeling, while again the thoughts induced held him for hours. The emotion that had so powerfully rushed over him when he first realized his love for Lucy had jarred his grip upon his purpose; and afterward intimate daily association with his brother and knowledge of the young man's severe disapproval united to move him now and then from his old point

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of view and to give him brief visitations of more wholesome feeling. If his love for Lucy, so suddenly realized, had met with no check, it alone might have been enough in time to turn him from his plans. A man of his temperament cannot be fired by two enthusiasms at the same time. He must give himself wholly to his absorbing desire. Since at the core Conrad's nature was sound and sweet, it is likely that after a little his love would have overmastered his desire for revenge. But Lucy's flirtation with his brother, induced by pique and disappointment at his constant association with Mrs. Ned Castleton, and Homer's prompt infatuation had led him to believe that the two younger people were in love with each other. Consequently he did his best to restrain his own feelings, and so limited their check upon the older sentiment. Francisquita little knew, or would ever guess, what grave consequences were flowing from her innocent effort to keep her sister-in-law within bounds. But for that the outcome of the Delafield affair would have been "another story."

Conrad returned from Santa Fe much disappointed by the failure of the clews that had promised so much. He debated whether it

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would be worth while to try to compel Gonzalez to disclose the name of his employer should the Mexican attack him again. He was doubtful of the success of such a plan, for he believed José as likely to give up his life as his secret. Nevertheless, he decided it would be worth trying. For several weeks after his return it chanced that whenever he went from home it was with Peters or some of the men, while there was always somebody about the corral and the house. He knew Gonzalez was watching him constantly, awaiting the moment when they should be alone. Toward the end of July he made up his mind to provide the opportunity and bring matters to a focus.

On the day he reached this decision his brother returned from Golden looking dejected. "They 've quarrelled," was Curtis's inward comment. He said nothing, nor did Homer mention Lucy's name, contrary to his custom of talking much about her after a day in her society. He was also less talkative than usual upon other subjects. During the evening, while Curtis read, Homer sat by the open door and smoked in gloomy silence, listening to the pouring rain and the rolling and echoing thunder. He was wondering,

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half in lover's anger and half in lover's downheartedness, why Lucy had been so unreasonable that day, and why she had acted as if she did not care whether he came or stayed away. Well, he would not trouble her with his company again very soon. He and Pendleton had been talking about a camping and hunting trip in the Mogollon Mountains, and he would see if they could n't get up the party and go at once.

The next morning a sky of pure, deep, brilliant blue shone over a freshening, greening plain. Homer rose from the breakfast table and walked out into the corral, throwing back his shoulders and breathing deeply of the dry, cool, exhilarating air. It seemed a different world from that of yesterday. There was no hurry about the camping trip, after all. "I think I 'll ride over to Golden," he said to his brother, "and see if that storm last night did much damage. It looked black in the mountains when I was coming home in the afternoon, and a bad flood may have come down the ravine."

Curtis smiled quizzically. A certain eager masterfulness in the young man's air brought to his mind conviction of the real purport of his brother's errand, and he felt no doubt of

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its result. "A good idea," he assented. "It was a bad storm and may have done a lot of harm. But I 'll have to use Brown Betty myself to-day. You can have your pick of the others."

He stood by and called out, "Good luck, old fellow!" as Homer mounted his horse, and laughed and swung his sombrero as the other turned away a blushing face. Curtis gazed after him, a swift vision filling his mind of the look that countenance would wear when he returned to tell him proudly that he had won Lucy's promise to be his wife. "And by that time I 'm going to know who Delafield is," he thought, his lips compressed, as he turned quickly into the corral.

"José," he called, "I want you to go to Adobe Springs this morning and see if any of the cattle are mired in the overflow from the storm last night. Then deepen the outlet so the water will all be carried away. You 'd better start at once. I 'll come after you in about half an hour and show you about digging out the outlet."

As Gonzalez mounted his horse at the corral gate he looked back and saw Conrad standing beside his mare, making her hunt through his pockets for sugar. "A brave man is Don

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Curtis," his thoughts ran. "He is so brave it does not seem right that he must die. But —" and he shrugged his shoulders with the air of one who says, "What would you?"

When José was well out of sight Conrad started after him, at first at a slower pace than usual. His mind was not upon the expected encounter, with its doubtful issue, nor upon the information, so long and ardently desired, that he hoped to extort from the Mexican. A month previous he would have been intent on that one thing, his thoughts absorbed in it, and his heart on fire with anticipation. Now he dwelt upon the idea of marriage between Lucy and Homer. "The lad 's a better man than I," he was thinking. "There 's more in him, and ten years from now I shan't be able to stack up alongside of him and make any showing at all — even if I 'm not in prison or hanged by the neck until dead long before."

He bared his brow, curiously white above the rest of his sunburned face, to the south wind. His lips tightened and his eyes glowed as he looked out over the gray road stretching before him, while his inward vision flashed down the grim and lonely path that led into the future. It was the way he had chosen,

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the one he had travelled with eager feet for fifteen years, and he must follow it to the end. A few miles farther on that gray track, perhaps just beyond that next hill, the longed-for knowledge was awaiting him. He would force it from Gonzalez, and then — Delafield! The thought fired his heart once more and his eyes blazed with the old indignation as his mind went back to the grief and loss of his early years, to that lonely night of hate and anger when his deadly purpose was born. He touched Brown Betty with his spur, quickening her pace to a smart gallop as he searched the road and plain with ardent eyes. His heart was bounding forward with anticipation, the savor of longed-for vengeance once more strong in his throat. In front of him lay a wide, shallow valley, with steep, storm-torn rims and brows shaggy with mesquite.

"I reckon, Betty B.," he said aloud, "it's about time to be looking for José, and this draw seems a likely sort of place for him."

He drew his revolver, glanced at its chambers, held it across the pommel in his right hand, and made sure of the handful of cartridges he had put in his pocket on leaving home. Brown Betty cantered across the bottom of the valley and, as she climbed the steep

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bank on the other side, lifted her head and neighed. From somewhere in the distance came an answering whinny. "It's one of our horses," thought Conrad.

At the hilltop he carefully searched the plain; a little way down the road, beside a clump of bushes, he saw a riderless horse. He chuckled. "José's sure hiding out around there somewhere," was his instant conviction. His head was high, his eyes flashing, and his face set in hard lines as he started the mare forward at a brisk trot. His gaze travelled toward the other horse, studying every bunch of mesquite and questioning every clump of amole and yucca that grew between.

His eye caught the motion of branches in a tall, spreading thicket of mesquite a hundred yards away, not far from the road. They swayed against the wind for a moment, trembled back and forth, and then bent before the breeze like their fellows. The growth was dense, but behind it he could distinguish the outlines of a darker mass, and an instant later he saw a tiny flash of light reflected from some small, bright object. "That must be the sun on his gun-sight," said Curtis, "and I reckon it's time to prepare for war."

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Dismounting, he threw the mare's bridle over her neck. "No; she'll follow me," he thought, "and she does n't need to mix up in the Delafield affair."

His eye still on the suspicious clump of bushes, Conrad fastened the mare to an outreaching mesquite limb at the roadside. "This is a better place for you, Brown Betty, nice old girl," he said, reaching back to pat her neck as she nickered after him.

His pistol in his hand and his vision holding the dark object behind the feathery green plumes of the mesquite, he went on briskly until he had covered half the distance between them. Then he saw the object move cautiously a little to one side, where the leaves were not so thick. Plainly visible now were the straw sombrero, the dusky face below it, the outline of the body, and the revolver held steadily between the branches.

Half a dozen strides more, and he fixed his eyes upon those of Gonzalez, dark and brilliant, gleaming through the scant, fern-like foliage like two coals of brown fire. Conrad's six-shooter pointed straight between them as he walked slowly toward the bush. He knew that José's was levelled at his breast. Revolver cocked and finger at trigger he came

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on, his eyes holding those of the Mexican. José's pistol hand he disregarded, trusting to his perception of the change, the instant's flash of decision, that would light Gonzalez's face when he pulled the trigger. He knew that, should he stumble or miss his footing and so give advantage, or should any hesitation show in face or eye, that second would the Mexican's bullet fly for his heart.

It was Curtis's intention not to hurt José unless the need became imperative. Therefore he did not fire, but came silently on, and Gonzalez stood, silent and still, behind the sheltering bush, each with pistol cocked and held at steady aim, the gaze of each holding insistently that of the other. It was a silent duel of eyes, of wills behind the eyes, of purposes behind the wills, and of temperament behind the purposes.

"Will he never shoot?" Conrad asked himself once and again as he approached.

"A brave man! A brave man!" was José's thought as he watched that steady advance, secure in his own advantage.

Curtis came on with resolute step — fifteen yards, a dozen yards, ten yards. Barely a score of feet separated the muzzles of the two revolvers, and still the blue eyes and the

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brown stared into each other with dauntless challenge.

"Why does n't he shoot?" thought José. "A brave, bold man! It is a pity to kill him."

"A moment more, and I 'll have him!" exulted Conrad. Fifteen feet, twelve feet, ten feet — still the space between them lessened, and still the silence was unbroken and their guns at unchanging aim.

Another step, and Curtis saw José's eyes waver; another, and heard him draw a little, gasping breath. He saw irresolution flash across the Mexican's face, saw his finger leave the trigger, his right arm tremble, and drop to his side.

Conrad felt cold sweat break out over his body and there was a loud buzzing in his ears. Yet neither in face nor eyes was there a sign that he had seen any change. With his gaze still fixed on the other's downcast lids, he moved sidewise around the bush, and stood beside Gonzalez.

"Give me your gun, butt first," he commanded in a low, tense voice. José raised his eyes to meet the muzzle of the gun looking blankly between his brows.

"You can take it if you like, Don Curtis,"

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he said unsteadily. "I am not going to shoot you. Here it is."

"Now," said Curtis, pointing both guns at José's head, "tell me the name of the man who hired you to kill me."

The Mexican started in surprise. He shrugged his shoulders, looked at the guns again, shuffled his feet uneasily. "Don Curtis, how can I?" he exclaimed in a reproachful tone. "You should not ask that question. It is not fair."

"Neither was it fair for you to try to stick me in the back before I was onto your game. So we 're even now, as you told me once before. You 've got to tell! I don't want to kill you, José; but, by God! I will, if you don't give up that man's name. I 'll give you one minute to think it over; and if you don't speak out then, I 'll blow your head off."

Gonzalez sent one searching glance into Conrad's set face, and dropped sullen eyes to the ground. He knew there was only one thing to do if he wished to live. For half the minute he stared downward, then looked blankly up at Curtis. "Fifteen seconds more," said the stern voice. His face worked, his lips opened and closed again. Then he seemed to gather himself together for the unwilling

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effort, and the words fairly rushed from his mouth:

"It is your friend, Señor Bancroft."

"What!" exclaimed Curtis, in a voice that had sunk back into his throat.

Gonzalez repeated his words. Conrad leaned forward, white with anger, and thrust the two revolvers close to the other's face. "José," he said slowly, in hard, sharp tones, "a little while ago a man told me that. I shook him as if he'd been a dog and told him that he lied. I ask you once more, the last time, who is it?"

Gonzalez threw back his head, crossed his arms, and looked his antagonist angrily in the eye. "I am not a liar, Don Curtis," he said proudly. "I may kill sometimes, if my *patron* wishes. But I do not lie." He placed the muzzle of one of the pistols against his heart. "I have told you the truth, Señor Conrad," he went on. "I swear to you, by the Mother of God, that I could not say different if you pulled that trigger now."

Conrad trembled and his white face went suddenly crimson. "It is hard to believe," he said; but he lowered the pistols. "I know you are not a liar, José, and you seem to be speaking the truth. You understand, don't

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you," he added in a tone almost apologetic, "that it is hard for me to believe what you say?"

"It is the truth, señor."

Curtis put his own pistol away, and looked thoughtfully at the other. "José," he said, "I shall have to think about this thing. In the meantime I 'm going to keep your gun."

"As you like, Don Curtis," replied Gonzalez, indifferently. "I shall do nothing more. To-morrow I shall ask for my time."

Conrad eyed him keenly. "Well, then, here 's your gun. Go on to Adobe Springs and do the work, as I told you. To-morrow morning, if you want it, you can have your time."

José took the gun, turned the cylinder, and one by one dropped the bullets to the ground.

"It is ended, Don Curtis," he said. Mounting his horse, he galloped down the road.

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CHAPTER XXII

REFLECTION AND REACTION

CONRAD stood still and stared at the Mexican's lessening figure, galloping down the road. Presently he walked across to his mare, stroked her nose, and said softly, "By God! Betty B.!" For some minutes he gazed at her abstractedly, swearing under his breath, and now and then muttering, "Aleck! Aleck Bancroft!" Coherent thought was not yet possible. He felt that José had told him the truth, and yet he could not believe it; between the opposing convictions his mind lay dazed and inactive. He mounted and turned Brown Betty's nose toward home, riding at a foot-pace with his head down and his attention all indrawn. For a mile or two the mare plodded on quietly. At last, resenting the lack of the companionable attentions her master was accustomed to bestow upon her when they rode alone, she snorted several times and switched her tail vigorously, flicking his legs. There was no

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response. She whinnied softly, waited a little, and tried it again. Still her rider was silent. So she stopped, lifted her head, and neighed loudly. Conrad aroused himself. "What is it, Betty?" he said, looking searchingly around the plain. Nothing was in sight save its usual silent habitants. He dismounted, and examined her anxiously. She nipped him playfully, nickered gently, and poked her nose into his coat pocket.

"Betty B., you 're a rogue!" he exclaimed, pulling her ear. "You 're just lonesome and want me to talk to you! My, but you 're spoiled!" He stroked her neck affectionately, then suddenly leaned against her, buried his face in her mane, and a single deep breath that was half a sob shook his body. "Betty!" he muttered, "to find that your best friend is the damnedest villain that ever went unhung!"

The little episode with the mare broke up the paralysis that staggering surprise had set upon both thought and feeling. As he mounted again his heart was hot and his mind working rapidly. "The damned villain!" he exclaimed savagely, "to be pretending such friendship with me when he knew what he had done!"

He spurred Brown Betty to a gallop. The

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tyrannous habit of mind engendered by long-wonted thought and desire urged him on to face at once the man who had despoiled his father and deprived him of his birthright. The old anger and hate surged over him, and his pulses beat swift and hard. For a while he forgot the personality of the enemy he had run to earth at last. Through his set teeth came whispered curses of hatred and contempt, and his tongue clung to the shameful epithets he longed to throw in the fellow's face. Not fast enough could he ride to keep pace with his desire. Revenge, so long fed with hope and promise, was calling to be sated. "Faster, Betty, faster!" he called to the mare, spurring her on.

But the very violence of his mood presently induced the beginning of reaction. He remembered who it was that he was riding so fast to expose and strike down. "Aleck! Aleck Bancroft!" he murmured, and slowed the mare's racing feet. The tenderness and loyalty of friendship raised still, small voices in his heart. Once again the thing staggered him. It seemed incredible. In the depths of his heart was conviction that José Gonzalez had told him the truth. But could he go to his best friend with such a charge, to taunt,

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insult, and challenge to death, on the word of a Mexican assassin? The idea repelled him. And he was glad of the misgiving, unwilling to believe that the quest he had followed with such eager determination was leading him to the door of Alexander Bancroft. "I ought — I ought to have confirmation, I suppose," he said to himself, uncertainly. And so, still undecided, feeling that it was truth and yet unwilling to believe, he came to the gate of his own corral. After he had unsaddled and stabled Brown Betty, he went through the kitchen for a drink of water from the big *olla*, wrapped in a wet coffee sack, that stood always in the drying wind and the shade of a tree beside the door.

Mrs. Peters came in from the store-room with a panful of potatoes. "Hank had to go to White Rock this morning," she said, "and he brought some mail for you. It's on your desk."

Conrad passed through the series of rooms, opening one out of another, to the front. On his desk lay some papers and a single letter. "Littleton!" he exclaimed as he hastily tore it open. He read:

"MY DEAR CURT: — I have at last got for you the information we've been searching for so long."

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His eyes eagerly rushed over the next few lines.

"I have satisfied myself that the man we've been trailing all these years is Alexander Bancroft, a banker and prominent man in New Mexico, who lives at Golden, — is that place anywhere near you? — and for a number of years has been considered one of the most solid, upright, and influential citizens of your Territory."

The letter dropped from Curtis's fingers and his heart gave a great thump that sent the blood in a crimson wave over his face. "My God, then, it's true!" he said aloud, and sat for a moment gazing at the letter in the same stupefied way he had looked after Gonzalez's retreating figure. A grim smile twisted the corners of his mouth as he read on.

"You may know him. Delafield's history as we've got it now makes his case one of those curious romances of detective work whose equal could hardly be found in fiction. We missed long ago the clew that would have led us to success, in those gaps in his trail we never tried to fill, because we came upon his tracks again so easily a little later. While working on another case recently I had occasion to look through an omnibus bill passed years ago by an Arizona legislature.

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It contained an astonishing ruck of things, and among them was a section authorizing William J. Brown to change his name to Alexander Bancroft. I knew that William J. Brown was one of the names under which Delafield had once traded in mines down there, and that, when we next found him after he had dropped that name, it was as John Smith, when he went down into old Mexico with John Mason Hardy. This name of Bancroft, sandwiched in there, and with such pains to legalize it, when we had found no track of it elsewhere, made me prick up my ears. I looked deeper into the matter and found that he had used this name of Bancroft only when he went to visit his wife and daughter, who lived most of the time in San Francisco or Denver, and were known by that name. When last we had track of the man, before I ran across Rutherford Jenkins, it was, you will remember, as Henry C. Williams, and then we lost all trace of him. That was because he went then on a visit to his wife and daughter in Denver and stayed there for some months. He had made a good clean-up about that time and increased it by some lucky trading on the Denver stock exchange. Then he went to New Mexico, kept the name of Bancroft, engaged in other business as well as mining, and settled down to be a permanent citizen.

"I congratulate you upon the successful termination of our long chase. I understand Bancroft

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is a man of considerable property and I hope you will be able to make him disgorge some of the goods he stole so long ago. I have written this much hurriedly, just to give you an outline of my discoveries at once. But I have all the necessary proofs, and whenever you want to bring the case to trial they are at your service."

Conrad folded the letter carefully, and put it in his pocket. He sat quite still, whispering "Aleck! Aleck Bancroft!" Presently his face went red again and starting up he hurried into the corral and threw the saddle again upon Brown Betty. Outside the gate, scarcely looking which way he went, he headed the mare toward Golden and galloped away, across the hills, and into the distance. He never knew just where or how far he rode that day. Afterward he remembered that sometimes he had galloped along a road and sometimes across the trackless plain, that sometimes he had found himself urging Betty to her utmost speed and again had traversed miles at a walk or had stood for a long time stock-still.

When he left the house the old idea that had enthralled him so long was clamoring in his heart. That may have been why, unconsciously, he rode at first down the road

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toward Golden. "It was not enough for him to take all my father had, life as well as money, and to make me drudge through my youth, but now he must set a hired killer upon me to stick me in the back!" So galloped his angry thought as Brown Betty's hoofs sped over the ground toward Bancroft's home. "Why did n't he come out in the open like a man and tell me who he was, and let us fight it out on the square? To send a man to live under my roof, and hire him to rope me, or stick me, or shoot me from ambush! And to pretend to be my good friend all the time! Coward! Thief! Murderer!"

Then, somehow, through his seething mind, for the first time came the remembrance of Lucy, and quickly followed the idea that perhaps Bancroft had gone about it in this secret way to save her from all knowledge of his disgraceful past. He checked Brown Betty's gallop to a walk. "He knew I was after him, hot-foot," now ran Curtis's thought, "and he sure had the right to head me off if he could. But he ought to have done it on the square!" He remembered the warnings Bancroft had given him about Gonzalez and about the danger of pursuing Delafield, and chuckled unmirthfully. "I reckon he was squaring

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himself to his own conscience," he said aloud.

Conrad looked about him and saw that he was on the road to Golden. Then came the flashing idea that he was on his way to kill Lucy's father. Instantly his feeling revolted. Whirling the mare's head he struck off across the plain to the eastward and after some miles struck the road to Randall. By that time he was pondering painfully the matter of Lucy and Homer. That evening, without doubt, Homer would come home, proud and happy, and tell him that he and Lucy were engaged. And this would be his wedding present to the girl he loved and the brother he had cared for almost since babyhood — the dead body of her father!

Then came pelting back the memory of his own wrongs, and Brown Betty was sent scudding down the road as remembrance and habit again lashed his heart. He turned about and raced back along the road toward Golden, hot with the old memories and sore with the newly discovered duplicity of his friend. "Even if I don't kill him," he thought, "I 'll tell him what he is! I 'll throw his villainy and his cowardice in his face! I 'll tell him he 's a sneak and a coward, and to draw if

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he dares!" His imagination rushed on through the scene and showed him, at the end, Bancroft's bleeding body at his feet.

With a shudder he wheeled the mare abruptly, turned from the road, and went galloping across the plain to the south. He began to understand that he could not kill Lucy's father. A sudden bright recollection came to him of how she looked that Spring afternoon when she and Bancroft had stopped at the ranch; how she turned to him in the wind, holding her wide hat down beside her face, and said gayly, "I assure you, Mr. Conrad, the most superior quality of father to be found anywhere in the United States!" And Bancroft seemed as fond of her as she was of him. Yes; there was unusual love and devotion between them. Brown Betty was walking more slowly now; and after a while Curtis realized that she was standing still in the middle of the plain with the road nowhere in sight. And at the same time it was borne in upon him that he did not wish to kill Lucy's father, that the idea had become repugnant to him.

He turned to seek the road, saying to himself, "What, then, shall I do?" The wish was still strong within him to make Delafield

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suffer punishment for his misdeeds, to make him atone by his own suffering for all that Conrad himself had suffered. There was still the law. "Homer said he would help me if I wanted to go at it that way," thought Curtis. That recollection helped his self-justification for a moment, then his thoughts went on: "But of course he would n't do anything of the sort now; and he would n't want me to, either." It occurred to him that such a course as that would bring to Lucy as much pain as would her father's death. She was so proud of him and believed in him so thoroughly. "It would break her heart if she knew all this about his past," he decided. Homer, too, how deeply hurt he would be to have Lucy's father disgraced and Lucy herself made utterly wretched! "The lad would never forgive me," he muttered. Presently he was telling himself that Lucy must never be made to suffer the shame and unhappiness of such a disclosure. Nor should Homer ever know the truth about Delafield's identity. He must be able to love and respect his wife's father.

With a loving smile Conrad recalled some of Lucy's indignant remarks about Baxter's dealings with the Mexicans of the Rio Grande

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valley, and saw again her winsome look as she tossed her curly head and her brown eyes sparkled. Then quickly came the self-questioning: What would she think of him if she knew the purpose that had been animating him all his life? Whether it was her father he had tracked or another, how horrified she would be if she knew she had made such a man her friend! He blushed crimson, and pricked the mare to a faster pace. The old longing for revenge, the old belief in the rightfulness of his course, the old sense of satisfaction in his purpose — it was all dying hard, but he had come to where he could see it as it looked to others. He began to feel ashamed.

Still, it was difficult to give up the feeling that Delafield should be made to suffer some sort of retaliation for the wrongs he had inflicted upon others. Conrad pondered it as he rode aimlessly about, still smarting under the thought of Bancroft's deception during the last few months. He might go to the banker and have it all out by word of mouth. But as he considered that course with cool mind he reached a pretty firm conviction that shots from one or the other, or both, would end the interview. Bancroft was not likely

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to submit tamely to insult from him. And much shame and sorrow for Lucy and Homer would result. He did not want them to suffer. His head lifted and his lips tightened. "I 'll give up the whole thing before I 'll let it cloud their happiness," he said aloud. Then he fell to thinking why Bancroft had tried to strike him down secretly.

"I reckon he was doing his best to head me off in a way that would save him from disclosure and prevent Lucy from knowing anything about it," he thought. "Well, I can't blame him for wanting to keep it dark, at this stage of the game. But — why did n't he come and tell me, like a man!" Suddenly he began to recall the sort of things about Delafield and his own expectations that he had been accustomed to say to Bancroft, and smiled grimly.

"Lord! I think likely I 've given him some pretty bad minutes! And I reckon what I said did n't invite his confidence. Good God, what a life the man must have lived all these years! It must have been plain hell since he 's known I was on his track and has had to listen to the things I 've said!"

Compassion for the man he had hounded and, all unknowingly, had so often reviled to

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his face, began to soften Curtis's heart. He thought of all the years of wandering, the frequent change of name, the ups and downs of fortune, the devious and sometimes crooked ways through which he had traced Delafield, and again he exclaimed aloud: "Good God, what a life! He must all the time have been wanting to get back where he could be settled and respectable! But he did n't dare try it while he was afraid of detection and punishment. And finally he believed he 'd got there, I reckon, and was preparing to be happy with his daughter — and then I came along!" Again he mused, for a long time, while the mare took her own pace. At last he lifted his head and said aloud:

"I guess he 's had his share of punishment after all; and I 've been responsible for a lot of it. Sumner L. Delafield, we 'll call it quits!"

Brown Betty was standing still in the middle of the road. The sun was dropping down the west, toward masses of sparkling, fleecy white clouds that piled the horizon high. Ten miles away he could see the green groves of Socorro Springs and the white glimmer of the buildings. He drew a long breath and looked alertly about. The load he had carried so many years had slipped from his back. No

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longer had he any desire for revenge, and in his heart glowed compassion rather than hatred for the man he had tracked with such determination. He felt a curious exhilaration as he sat there looking about him, while the mare shifted her weight from one foot to another.

"Well, Betty B.," he said, patting her neck, "you and I have had a devil of a time to-day, have n't we, old girl? But we 've come through all right, thank God! And nobody is ever going to know a word about it, Betty; so don't you give it away. We 're going home now, and you shall have the best supper we can find."

At the ranch his first inquiry was for Homer. The young man had returned an hour before. Surprised that he was not in beaming evidence, Curtis went in search of him and found him in his own room, bending over his trunk, his belongings scattered about as if a cyclone had been swirling within the four walls.

"Why, Homer," exclaimed Curtis, stopping in astonishment at the door, "what are you doing?"

Homer lifted a dismal face. "I 'm packing up. I 'm going away."

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"Why, lad, what's the matter? I thought—" Curtis stopped, hesitating and embarrassed.

Homer energetically jammed some books into a corner of the trunk, and from its depths took up the unfinished sentence. "Yes; so did I. That is—I hoped. But it was n't so. She—she says she's never going to leave her father—that he needs her—that she's always going to stay with him."

"Yes," said Curtis, lamely; "I know she's very devoted to him." He stopped; Homer went on with his packing. "I—I suppose, lad," the elder brother stumbled on, in kindly tone, "it hurts now, but—you'll get over it after a while." There was silence again while Homer threw a litter of neckties, collars, and handkerchiefs into his trunk. "I'd like you to stay here all Summer with me," Conrad went on presently, "but if you think you'd be more comfortable somewhere else, it's all right. I understand."

Homer looked up. "I'm going to Denver. I've got a classmate up there whose father I know will give me a job till college opens next Fall."

Curtis walked out into the corral and leaned

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upon the gate. Would there be a chance for him, then? Likely not, for she had surely shown more favor to his brother than to him. But he would try. His heart rose at the possibility. Yes, he would try. He looked at his brown, sinewy hands and thought of Lucy's little white ones lying in them. "Thank God, they're free from blood!" he said to himself with solemn gladness. Then the crimson dyed his face. Even if Lucy cared for him, which he hardly dared to hope, would she marry a man who had so long guided his life by such purposes as he had cherished? "But I'll tell her," he thought with grim determination, "just how bloody-minded I've been. It will likely spoil my chance — if I have any — but she must first know just what I am. I'll tell her all about it, without giving a hint of who the man is that I've followed. And after that — well, I'll feel that I've been square about it, anyway."

The sun was setting, and the whole sky was ablaze with its glory. The fleecy white clouds of two hours before, which had mounted higher and multiplied themselves many times, had become mountains of glowing color, masses of sea-shell tints, wide

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expanses of pink and pearly gray, hearts and beckoning hands of flame. Curtis gazed at the glowing kaleidoscope of the heavens, feeling its gorgeous beauty mingle with the thankfulness that filled his heart. It was good to be done with all those old ideas and feelings and to have come out of it without ruining anybody else's life.

Through the crimson and purple lights and shadows that enveloped the plain he saw Gonzalez galloping up the road, a fine, graceful, centaur-like figure.

"José," said Conrad as Gonzalez entered the corral, and his tone struck the Mexican as being unusually gentle, "I know that you spoke the truth to me this morning. But what you told me shall go no further. Mr. Bancroft shall never know that you told me, and neither he nor anybody else shall suffer harm because of it. There is no longer any need of a feud between you and me, and I wish you would stay and work for me. It is n't every day that I can get hold of a cowboy that knows enough to hit the ground with his hat in three throws."

José smiled, and shook his head. "No, Don Curtis. I like you much, and you are a very brave man. You are a braver man

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than I am. But to-morrow I am going back to Santa Fe."

"Well, then, if you won't stay I 'll give you your time whenever you want it. But, I say, José, why don't you give up this rattlesnake business? You 're on the level every other way; and you 're too good a fellow to discredit all your race with this sort of work when you could be a first-class cowboy if you wanted to."

The Mexican looked at him with a wondering smile, shook his head, and went on into the corral. Conrad strolled to the little porch at his front door, stood there a moment watching the sunset colors; then, with his head in the air, went inside and sat down at his desk. He began a letter to Rutherford Jenkins:

"I have found that you told me the truth in that interview we had in your room in the hotel at Albuquerque some months ago. I do not know by what mysterious dispensation of Providence this strange thing happened, but I acknowledge now that it was the truth. I still maintain, however, that my final remark to you on that occasion was absolutely correct.

"I suppose you have been using this information about Mr. Bancroft's previous life to blackmail him. I advise you to stop it and to let him

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alone hereafter. If you don't, I tell you right now that you will surely wish you had. I shall take pains to find out whether or not you heed my warning, and if you don't I promise you that you will soon be able to sympathize with a skunk after a cowboy has thrown at it a can of oil and a blazing stick. Yours truly,

"CURTIS CONRAD."

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CHAPTER XXIII

LOVE TO THE RESCUE

A CLERK brought the morning mail, and as Alexander Bancroft took the handful of letters, his eye caught the handwriting of Rutherford Jenkins. Apprehension seized him. Had that creature found some new screw he could turn? His hand trembled as he tore open the envelope. For a moment he felt distinct relief when he found nothing more than a demand for additional money. Jenkins reminded him that the first of August was approaching, and added that he was obliged to ask for double the amount he had previously received on the first of the month. The feeling of thankfulness that the letter contained nothing worse passed quickly, as he realized that he would be afraid to refuse the demand, that he would not dare to refuse anything Jenkins might ask. The full weight of his chains was upon him, and he swore between set teeth as he tore the letter angrily into bits and dashed

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them into the waste-basket. Impotent rebellion was still smouldering in his eyes when a knock came at his door and Dellmey Baxter entered. The Congressman's round, smooth face was beaming and his fat hand grasped Bancroft's with hearty greeting. But the droop of his left eyelid was marked and his gray eyes were cold and hard. They had a prolonged conference about the various enterprises in which they were jointly interested, and about the progress and prospects of Baxter's campaign in the southern part of the Territory, where Bancroft was his chief lieutenant.

"I tell you, Aleck, you 're handling it fine," said Baxter finally, with friendly enthusiasm. "You 're bringing Silverside and the whole south right into line in great shape! I 'm free to say, Aleck, that you 're doing better for me than I could do for myself. You have a remarkable knack for handling people, and everybody has confidence in you. We 've got the party in this Territory where we want it now, and if I decide to quit Congress after another term or two, as it 's likely I shall, I 'll see to it, Aleck, that you step into my shoes if you want to." He went on to ask what certain of his supporters

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and his opponents were doing, and presently inquired:

"And your young friend Conrad — does he still think I have horns and hoofs? He came to see me in Santa Fe recently, and apologized for having accused me of being at the bottom of that Mexican's attack on him. From what he said to me," the Congressman went on, regarding Bancroft attentively, "I think it 's likely the greaser will get the worst of it if he keeps up that racket."

The banker moved uneasily, then took cigars from the box on top of his desk. "By the way, Aleck," said Baxter carelessly between whiffs of smoke, "you 've been around this Territory considerably and mixed with mining men a good deal." His cold eyes were watching his companion from under their shaggy brows. "Do you remember ever running across a chap named Delafield?"

The time had been when Bancroft could hear that name without the quiver of a lash or the tremble of a nerve. But those days of cool self-control and impassive seeming had gone by. For many weeks he had been on the rack of constant apprehension, the nervous strain of conflicting emotions

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concerning Conrad had been great, and recently the fear of sudden exposure had grown into a secret, abiding terror. He started, dropped his cigar, and his face paled.

"Delafield?" he repeated in a low voice. "I do not remember the name — and I have a pretty good memory for names, too." The desire seized him to know whether Baxter was speaking out of knowledge or ignorance. "What about him?" he went on. "Is he supposed to be living here?"

"I don't know much about it," Baxter rejoined, "but I believe the people who are trying to locate him make the guess that he is. A party asked me about him not long ago, but I was n't able to place the name, although it has a familiar sound. I told him it was n't any use looking for his man under that name — it 's too easy to pick up a new one out here for anybody to keep an old one that 's got dirty."

When the door closed upon the portly figure and cherubic smile of the Congressman, Bancroft sat still and stared dully at the wall. "Dell knows," was the conviction that had gone straight to his wretched heart. "Dell knows. He knows the whole story. And now I 've got to do whatever he says."

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Apprehension leaped quickly forward. If Baxter knew, was the story out? Was it already going from mouth to mouth? Second thought brought reassurance. No; for in that case Baxter would not have so discretely veiled his hint. But how had he found out? Could Jenkins — no, not likely, for Jenkins was making too good a thing out of it as a secret. Baxter said Conrad had been to see him — then did Curtis know by this time? His heart took quick alarm, and he had a moment of desperation. Then he recalled the young man's repeated declaration that he meant to lose no time in facing Delafield after learning the man's identity. He soon decided that a little time was still left to him before that encounter could take place and — Gonzalez was yet at the ranch. Doubtless Conrad had talked with Baxter about the case, perhaps told him of his own search and asked for information about the men he suspected. Finally, knowing well the Congressman's mental habits, he came to the conclusion that Baxter had put things together and made a shrewd guess.

"But he knows, all right," Bancroft owned to himself in impotent anger, "and that means another chain on me." Another obstacle had

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risen in his path that would have to be overcome, one way or another, before he could reach that longed-for security. A little before, safety had seemed so near, and now it was further away than ever! He should have to fight for it, that was plain — and fight he would, to the last inch, Conrad and Jenkins and Baxter. They had pushed him to the wall, but that should not be the end. He would not let them wreck everything if — no matter now what he might have to do to protect himself.

He spent an anxious forenoon, unable to keep his mind off his own troubles and impending dangers, thinking and scheming, trying to work out effective means of defence and counter-attack. When he left the bank for luncheon at home, it was with a lively sense of how restful and pleasing he should find its atmosphere of love, respect, and confidence. He bought a box of candy for Lucy and a magazine for Louise, and hastened up the hill.

Never before had home seemed to him so delightful. Lucy was gay of spirit, piquant, rosy of cheek and bright of eye, lovingly solicitous for his comfort. Louise was paler than usual, with a touch of wistfulness in

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her manner. Lucy explained that she had a bad headache, and they agreed that it was probably due to the day's peculiar atmospheric conditions. It was hot and still; a thin, gray, luminous haze veiled the sky and made the sunshine, usually clear and white, look palely yellow; the air was charged with electricity, whose jangling effect upon the nerves only the soundest could withstand. Louise said she felt it acutely. As always, she was gentle and sympathetic, and Bancroft felt her influence at once. Her presence never failed to soothe, tranquillize, and encourage him.

She saw the anxiety in his eyes, and at once divined a new cause for trouble. With renewed alarm and indignation in her heart her thoughts turned to Conrad. Had there been some new development? The fires of love and solicitude for her friend and of hatred for his enemy were burning brightly in her secret thoughts and shone now and then in her eyes. Bancroft caught their glow, and his heart rose to be warmed in it. What a sweet woman she was, how adorable! His arms ached with the longing to enfold her and press her dearness to his breast. But no! — with such dangers thickening about

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him, he must not think of it. It angered him the more that he must thus repress the feeling which was struggling to make itself understood, which he felt certain she would welcome. For half an hour after luncheon they lingered on the veranda. As if drawn irresistibly by secret cords of feeling, Bancroft and Miss Dent kept constantly near each other; once, when she accidentally touched his hand, his fingers closed quickly upon hers in a moment's warm grasp.

After he had gone, Louise walked restlessly up and down, her nerves strung to the highest tension by her love and anxiety for Bancroft and her hatred of Conrad. Her headache grew rapidly worse, and her heart was beating like a trip-hammer. She and Lucy agreed that the electrical condition of the atmosphere had become more trying. The sunshine, too, was more dingily yellowish. They noticed that heavy, dark clouds, like huge, sleeping beasts, were lying behind the summits of the Mogollon Mountains.

"My head is throbbing so I can hardly see," said Louise finally, "and I think I'll go to my room, pull down the shades, and lie down for a while. No; thank you, dear, you can't do anything. Just leave me alone

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for an hour or two in the quiet and the dark."

Lucy sat on the veranda with the magazine and the box of candy her father had brought; but one lay unopened in her lap and the other untouched on the table beside her, while her eyes wandered across the tree-embowered streets of the town and far over the plain, where, beyond the horizon, were the green groves of the Socorro Springs ranch.

"I 've got to do it," she whispered to herself, decision in her wrinkling brow. "There 's no other way, and I must. Daddy is looking wretched — I 've never seen him look so anxious and disturbed as he does to-day. I 've got to do it, right away."

She had not seen Curtis Conrad since the barbecue. Daily had she watched for him, hoping always to see him climbing the hill, longing greatly to look upon his face, and feeling that she must reveal her secret and so put an end, as she firmly believed she could, to her father's trouble. But he came not; instead, Homer's visits increased in length and frequency, and she, still hurt and angered by the memory of Curtis's attentions to Mrs. Ned Castleton at the barbecue,

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recklessly continued her flirtation with Homer, plunging him more and more deeply in love. She did all this without thought of what was going on in Homer's breast, wishing only to dull the pain in her own aching heart. Finally, when she realized what was happening, she changed her demeanor in sudden girl-panic, only to precipitate the young man's proposal, by which she had been both surprised and vexed.

She was quite sure, by this time, that Curtis Conrad did not care for her at all, and she had ceased expecting him to come to their house. Yet she never went out upon the veranda without letting her eyes wander wishfully down the street. They were there now, scanning the long, steep hill. But they saw only a little, bare-legged Mexican boy toiling slowly up the grade. No, she decided, only one thing was left for her to do: she would have to write and ask him to come and see her. Her heart rebelled at first, and she unconsciously tossed her head and her eyes flashed. "But it 's for daddy," she presently told herself, "and there 's no other way. I 've got to do it." Of course, it would be a humiliation; but so was the whole hateful business, and what was one little thing more or less?

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Looking toward the street again she saw that the little Mexican lad was coming to her gate. His baggy, ragged overalls were held by a single strap over his shoulder, and his small, brown face, under his miniature, torn sombrero, was hot and dirty. He peered at her through the palings, and she exclaimed, "Why, it's little Pablo Melgares!" She went down to the gate, saying in Spanish, "Do you want anything, Pablo?"

Gravely and silently he gave her a letter he had been carrying in his hat. Although she had seen the handwriting but once before, her heart leaped and a delicious thrill ran through her veins as she read the address.

"Is there an answer?" she asked, tremulously.

"*Si, señorita,*" said the boy.

"Then you sit down here on the steps and eat candy until I come back," she said as she poured the contents of her box into the child's sombrero.

She ran lightly up the stairs to her room and closed the door before opening the note. It said only:

"Will you go to ride with me this afternoon up the canyon? I have something particular I want to

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say. Please send me word by the boy if I may come up at once."

She devoured it with shining eyes, and pressed it to her face, her lips, her heart. Her woman's instinct divined what the "something particular" must be, and she laughed softly and joyously, while the color mounted to her brow. But presently, as she donned her riding habit, her look grew serious and grave. For a few minutes she had forgotten what it was she had to do.

"I must tell him," she thought, "and then that will be the end of everything." The brown eyes filled with tears, and she choked back a little sob. "But I 've got to do it," she repeated with determination. "He won't love me then, but poor daddy will be safe. And I would n't marry him anyway, because I 'm not going to marry anybody. I won't let him say anything to me about — about anything; I 'll tell him about daddy before he has a chance. But I won't have to tell him right away — when we are coming back, maybe." Her fingers were busy with her collar in front of the mirror. "Dear me, I 'm dreadfully tanned! But he told me once he liked the healthy brown skins the girls all

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get down here. No; I shall not let him have the least idea that I care anything about him; but—" and the smiles and dimples were chasing each other across her face as she started down the stairs. On her way she slipped softly into Miss Dent's darkened room. Louise was awake, and Lucy stood beside her bed, stroking her forehead with affectionate fingers.

"Poor Dearie! Can't I do something for you before I go out? Do you think you can sleep? Then you won't mind my going, will you? Mr. Conrad has come to take me to ride. We are going up the canyon. Was n't it jolly of him to think of it this stupid, yellow afternoon?"

"Yes; certainly, dear, I 'm glad you 're going, and I hope you 'll have a delightful ride. Don Homer is always so thoughtful."

Lucy was settling her hat in front of the mirror. "Oh, it is n't Don Homer! It 's his brother."

Miss Dent started up. "Curtis Conrad! You 're not going with him!"

Lucy looked at her with surprise. "Why, yes, Dearie. Why not?"

"Lucy, darling! You must not go!"

Louise was sitting up now, her hands at

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her temples. Lucy bent over her with an arm about her neck. "You surprise me very much, Dearie. I thought you liked him."

"Yes; of course. But you must not go with him this afternoon. It will not do."

The girl sat down on the bed beside her. "But I've said I would, Dearie, and he's already here, waiting for me with the horses. And I must go, Dearie. It would be awfully rude and horrid to try to get out of it now."

Sudden apprehension filled Miss Dent's mind. It was not like Lucy to hold so persistently to anything that was against her wish. Her intense feeling against Curtis Conrad swept over her excited, tingling nerves and filled her mind with the conviction that she must keep Lucy away from him. Things jigged and swam before her eyes, as her thoughts whirled dizzily through her brain. "Lucy, dear child!" she exclaimed, "I wish you would not go. Indeed, you must not go!"

Lucy arose, clad in a new womanly dignity that sent a half-realized dismay through the turmoil of Miss Dent's mind. Vaguely, with an aching sense of loss, she felt that Lucy had become a woman who would henceforth

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direct her life for herself. With her hands holding her throbbing head, through which excruciating pains were darting, Louise strove to steady her thoughts.

"I don't understand," said Lucy, gently, "why you speak in this way, or why you wish me to be rude to Mr. Conrad. If there is any good reason why I should not go to ride with him this afternoon, and you will tell me what it is, so that I can judge for myself, I can beg him to excuse me, because you are not well — and — ask him to stay to dinner instead."

New alarm seized Miss Dent. In her excitement she tried to rise, only to drop back trembling upon the bed. For the moment her one thought was that this man must be kept out of the house. "Lucy," she pleaded, despair in her voice, "you do not understand. He is not our friend now. He is your father's enemy — and is trying to kill him."

She stopped in sudden panic at having said so much, and Lucy started back amazed.

"Oh, Dearie — you don't know, do you — and daddy — you don't know about daddy?"

Louise looked up, her face white and drawn, astonishment veiling the pain in her eyes.

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"Lucy, Lucy! Do you know — about your father — and this man — and yet you will go with him?"

Lucy's curly head was high as she answered deliberately: "Yes, Dearie! I am going so that I can save daddy from any further trouble. I shall tell Mr. Conrad who daddy is."

Miss Dent gasped and her mouth worked for a moment before she could speak. "Oh, child, you don't know what you are doing! I beg of you, Lucy, don't go — don't do it! If you love me, if you love your father, don't tell him! He will kill —"

The girl drew herself up proudly. "Indeed, Dearie, you don't know Curtis Conrad as well as I do, if you think he will do the least thing to hurt daddy, after he knows. That 's why I 'm going to tell him — to save daddy. I love him, Dearie, but I shall not let him know that I do. And I want to hear him say, just once, that he loves me — and then I shall tell him — who I am and who daddy is." She turned half away, then rushed back to throw her arms around her friend's neck. "Darling Dearie, I know I am hurting you! But won't you trust me about this, and love me just the same? I know I am

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doing the best thing for daddy — and — after to-day, I 'm never going to see Curtis Conrad again!"

Louise fell back, exhausted, as Lucy kissed her forehead and ran from the room.

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CHAPTER XXIV

THE HEAVENS OPEN

CONRAD and Lucy rode along a street skirting the brow of the *mesa* until the houses of the town in the valley below became few and straggling. Down the last roadway cut across the sides of the canyon they descended to the bottom of the ravine. Thence upward it was so narrow that the bed of the creek and the road left only scant margins of rocky soil. In these grew cottonwoods, willows, and a few other trees, whose overarching branches made a green and pleasant vista. The creek wound crookedly down the valley, frequently crossing the road, while here and there the walls of the gulch drew so close together that the track was forced into the bed of the stream. Notwithstanding the recent rains, the water was too shallow to reach above their horses' knees.

The way was quite deserted, and after leaving the town they saw no other travellers. A

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cool, damp wind came down the ravine and Lucy took off her hat and let it toss back her brown curls. They had grown longer since the early Spring, and now clustered in soft rings around her ears and neck. A touch of sadness lingered upon her spirits, because of the distressing scene with Miss Dent. It was the first difference that had ever arisen between them. A poignant longing filled her heart, also, because this was to be her final interview with the man she loved. The painful duty she had set herself filled the background of her consciousness and laid upon her manner an unusual reserve.

But these more sombre emotions mingled with the gladness of the knowledge that she was beloved, and all combined to invest her with a new maturity of womanliness, a sweet dignity that sent filtering through Conrad's eager love a sensation of wonder and reverence. It could not be possible that this lovely, this adorable being would receive his homage, would consent to love him! But he would try. She was willing to ride with him, and there was hope in that. And, yes, he would not forget that he must tell her about his unworthy life — he must tell her even before he asked her to marry him. But oh, how

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beautiful she was, how sweet! Every movement of her head, her arm, her body, every twinkling smile, every fleeting dimple, poured fresh wine into his blood. A torrent of love and admiration was sweeping through him, and from it were constantly breaking off and flowing over their friendly talk little cascades of compliment, of admiring speech, of sentences glowing with hints of his feeling.

But Lucy quickly caught the trend of every one and turned it back with laughing retort and merry speech. He could not get within her guard, and every deft turn of her jesting, foiling replies made him only the more eager. He forgot that he was going to make confession, forgot to watch the dark clouds that were rising above the mountain tops, forgot everything but this alluring creature, who grew more alluring every moment, and yet would not let him loose the torrents of loving speech. And Lucy, in the sweet excitement of letting him say a little, and again a little, and then a little more, yet keeping up her guard and never letting him reach the danger point, Lucy also forgot what she had meant to keep constantly in mind. Now and then duty put out a warning hand. But — the exhilaration of the present moment, the precious

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consciousness of his love, the thrilling pleasure of this Cupid's dance — she could not give it up so quickly. Presently she would tell him.

Thus has it been Love's habit, ever since Love came to live in this world, to dance with happy and forgetful foot over volcanoes ready to engulf him in their fires, beneath clouds ready to drown him with their pouring sorrows. No matter what the dangers, when the maid lures and the man pursues, Love knows only his own delight. So went Lucy and Curtis up the beautiful canyon road, thrilling with the happiness that can be but once, — before the first kiss has brushed away the exquisite bloom of love, — forgetting alike the bonds they had put upon themselves and the dangers that lurked in the threatening storm.

At last the darkening atmosphere caused Conrad to notice how high the clouds had risen. "I 'm afraid there 's going to be a bad storm, Miss Bancroft," he said, "and perhaps we 'd better turn back. When we started I did n't think it would rain before night, but those clouds are piling up fast and they look as if they meant business. I 'm sorry, for a little ways above here there 's a beautiful place, where the walls of the canyon spread out and

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you get a splendid view. I wanted to take you there, and tell you—" It was not so easy after all, to loose the torrents of speech, and for a bare instant he hesitated. It was enough to give Lucy her chance.

She shot at him a single sparkling glance, and broke in with, "Oh, I 'll race you there!" As she spoke she touched her horse and darted ahead, leaving him alone in the middle of the road at the very beginning of his declaration. The wind blew her curls into a tangled frame for her laughing face as she looked back over her shoulder. He quickly spurred Brown Betty forward, but she had got so much the start that it was some moments before he was again at her side.

"You took me by surprise," he said as they slowed their horses at the foot of a steeper incline, "and handicapped me, or you would n't have got so far away. When we go back I 'll race you all the way down the canyon, if you like."

"Agreed!" she laughed. "Would n't it be jolly to go at a gallop all the way down the canyon, from the mountains to Golden? But the poor horses!"

"I think we 'd better turn back, Miss Bancroft. I don't like the look of those clouds.

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It 's going to be a regular deluge, I 'm afraid. But first, I want to tell you — "

"Oh, my hat! I 've dropped it!" she exclaimed. Curtis leaned over easily, picked it up, and hung it on his own pommel. Her eyes were twinkling and the dimples were playing hide-and-seek with a wilful little smile that hovered around her mouth. "So awkward of me," she said apologetically, "and how readily you picked it up! I wish I could do that! Do you know, Mr. Conrad, you 've never given me those lessons in the cowboy's art, roping and riding and all that, you promised ever so long ago."

"We 'll begin them whenever you say the word. After I tell you — "

"About that beautiful place? Oh, yes! Can't we go that far? I 'd love to see it!" She was bounding ahead again, but he was quickly beside her. A quizzical look was on his face and a touch of mastery in his manner as he leaned toward her and rested his hand upon her horse's neck.

"Now, if you try to run away again," he said banteringly, "it 's you who will have the handicap!" She gathered up her bridle and with a touch of her quirt wheeled her horse half way around and away from his detaining

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hand. The whim had seized her to start flying back down the road, "just a little way," she thought, "just to tease him." But as she turned she met a glowing look that checked her impulse.

"Lucy!" he was saying, and his voice lingered over her name like a soft and warm caress, "Lucy! I love you. Will you be my wife?"

It had come, the question she had meant not to let him ask, and at once it sobered her spirits and brought back the remembrance of what she must tell him. Her head drooped until her brown curls half hid her crimsoning face, and her voice was low and troubled. "Indeed, Mr. Conrad, I can never be any man's wife. My father needs me. I shall never marry, and I shall stay with him as long as he lives."

"I know how devoted you are to your father, Lucy—" he stopped, and repeated her name as if he loved the sound of it—"Lucy, and it is so sweet and beautiful that it makes me love you even more. Tell me, Lucy, do you love me?"

The question took her unawares, and he saw her hand tremble. She hesitated for a moment before replying, with dignity: "I have

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told you I could not marry you. Is n't that enough?" Unconsciously they had again headed their horses toward the mountains and were walking slowly up the canyon.

"No, Lucy; it is n't enough!" he exclaimed eagerly. "Something tells me that perhaps you do care a little for me, and if you do I want to know it — I must know it!"

"I shall never see you again after to-day. You must be satisfied with that," she replied, tossing her head and turning her face away from his shining and pleading eyes.

"How can I be satisfied —" he began, and the wind blew her hair as she turned her head away and showed one little pink-tinted ear nestling among the curls. His gaze devoured it. "How can I," he went on, "when you — when you have such a beautiful ear!"

"What difference does it make when we can never see each other again?" Her manner was evasive and her speech hesitating, for she was trying hard to bring herself to the point of telling him the fateful secret.

"All the difference in the world! Lucy, sweetheart! Tell me if you care!" He leaned toward her and took her wrist in his hand.

"You 've no right to ask that question again! I shall say no more than I have said

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"IT HAD COME, THIS QUESTION SHE HAD NOT MEANT TO LET HIM ASK"

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already." She made an effort to release her arm, but he would not relax his firm, though gentle and caressing, grasp.

"Lucy, I would never beg for a woman's love, nor ask her to try to care for me, if she did n't love me, of herself. But when the woman I love with all my heart won't deny that she loves me, then I must hear her say in her own sweet voice that she does. Lucy, darling, tell me that you love me!"

She was trembling from head to foot, but she drew herself together with fresh determination and held her head up proudly as she answered, looking straight ahead: "I have told you that I shall never marry, and that after to-day I shall never see you again. That must be enough, for I shall say no more."

He let go her wrist, and she tapped her horse to a faster pace. She was thinking intently, trying to frame in her mind the best words in which to make her confession. Suddenly, over the top of a steep incline, they came upon a wide and splendid view. The sides of the canyon seemed to melt and flow back, giving far-ranging sight of the sombre purple mountains towering toward heaven and of the hills dwindling down into the plain.

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"Lucy," he exclaimed, "here is the beautiful place of which I told you. I wanted to bring you here to tell you of my love, because this is the most beautiful spot I know. Lucy, darling, I love you with all my heart, and if you cannot deny that you love me, then it is my right, the right of my love, to hear you say that you do. Never mind about not leaving your father and meaning never to marry. We 'll talk about that afterward. Won't you tell me now that you do love me?"

Her eyes dropped from the high and wide horizon to her horse's mane. She tried to say, "I do not love you," but her heart rose in rebellion and forbade the untruth. She opened her lips, but no sound came from them. Curtis bent toward her, trying to take her hand, but she drew it away. With all her strength she was contending for her determination against both him and the traitor within her own heart. He leaned nearer, pleading in tones that were half loving command and half loving entreaty, "Lucy! Lucy, love! Look up! Let me see your eyes, your dear, beautiful eyes!"

Lucy clasped her hands together hard and bowed her head. He was bending over her, his shoulder touching hers. She heard his

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voice, soft and rich with love, whispering, "Lucy, darling!" And suddenly, scarcely knowing what she did, she lifted her head and looked into his eyes. Instantly his arms were about her, and he heard her murmuring, "I do love you! Oh, I do love you!" He bent his ardent face to hers, but before their lips met she started away, freeing herself from his encircling arms.

"Stop!" she cried, putting out a forbidding hand, as she moved her horse away. "You have made me tell you, against my will, that I love you. Now you must listen while I tell you who I am." There was a suggestion of defiance in the poise of her head and in the flashing of her eyes as they looked squarely into his.

"And you must understand," she went on, "that after I tell you this I want you to forget everything that has passed between us this afternoon, just as I shall do. For I am the daughter of Sumner L. Delafield!"

In an instant his arms were about her again. "Lucy, dearest, you 've told me no news! I 've known it since yesterday."

She struggled to free herself. "But my father — you hate him — you — you wish to kill him — I heard what you said to him that

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day at your ranch, last Spring — and afterward I happened to find out who he is."

A wave of crimson deepened the color of his sunbrowned face. "All that is dead and buried," he said, "and I am ashamed of it, now. I want you to help me forget that I allowed such base thoughts to master me so long. I 'm going to your father this afternoon to tell him that I have forgiven the old debt, and everything else, and to ask him to forgive me. My poor little girl! I never dreamed your dear heart was being worried by that affair!"

She let him fold her in his caress, whispering happily, "I knew all the time you would n't do it — I knew you would n't hurt daddy, or anybody."

A loud clap of thunder rolled and echoed over the mountains, and a splash of raindrops fell on their faces. Conrad looked at the dense black clouds and at the gray veil dropping athwart the mountains, and turned to Lucy with alarm in his face. "We must start back at once and ride down that canyon for all we 're worth! This storm is going to be a corker, but maybe we can beat the worst of it. I 've done wrong to bring you so far — but I can't regret it now, sweetheart!"

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They started at a gallop down the long canyon road. The patter of big drops that had given them warning quickly increased to a steady, beating downpour that drenched them to the skin. An almost tangible darkness was sifting through the atmosphere. It filled the sky overhead, drifted down the ravine, and seemed to settle, making a thick twilight under the arching trees. Blinding zigzags of lightning slashed the clouds and played through the middle air, and a terrific roar and boom and rattle of thunder kept up in the mountains behind them and echoed back and forth between the walls of the gulch.

The creek was already rising, and each time they had to cross it they found its muddy torrent swifter and higher. The road was rocky, and in many places had been made slippery by the rain, and there were frequent steep inclines down which they dared not go at a rapid gait. They had put behind them hardly more than a third of the distance when Conrad, looking backward, saw a cloud of inky blackness settle and drop upon the earth. A deep, booming sound mingled with a deafening clap of thunder. The ground trembled. The horses quivered with fright and darted

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forward at a faster pace. Lucy saw Curtis's face blench in the half darkness.

"What is it?" she asked, glancing backward anxiously.

"That was a cloudburst," he answered in a tone that thrilled with comprehension. "It struck back there, just this side of our beautiful spot, and a mountain of water will soon come tearing down behind us. We've got to ride like the wind! Perhaps we can make the first road that crosses the ravine, and you can go up there while I ride on and warn the town."

"No! I'll ride on with you."

"I can't let you do that," was his swift reply. "Are you frightened, dearest?"

"No," she answered in a steady tone; "I'm not frightened at all. And I'm going to ride on with you. It would be easy to die with you, if we must — but I couldn't live without you, now."

He bent toward her and touched her arm with loving reverence as they galloped on at the swiftest speed possible. The horses needed neither whip nor spur, but with ears laid back and necks outstretched were fleeing down the dim canyon for their lives. As they bounded up a low bank, where the road crossed the

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creek bed again, Lucy's horse stumbled, slipped, and fell with his forelegs doubled under him. He gave a scream of pain and terror. Lucy, freeing her foot from the stirrup as he fell, jumped to one side. Curtis checked Brown Betty, leaned over, and grasped the girl around the waist. She helped him with an upward spring, and as he lifted her to the saddle he shifted his own seat to the back, and they galloped on, leaving the crippled horse to his certain fate.

Behind them they could hear the booming, rattling roar of the avalanche of water that was sweeping down between the canyon walls. And presently, piercing through even its rumbling tumult and the crashing thunder, they heard the death cry of the horse they had left behind, and knew that he had been engulfed in the mountainous wave that was rushing toward them at a speed they could not hope to equal. Lucy trembled at the sound and nestled her head against Conrad's shoulder.

As they neared the first road cutting across the gulch Curtis lowered his head to Lucy's ear: "Sweetheart, we are almost at the first road out. I can put you off and you can run up there and be safe."

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"No," she whispered back; "don't stop for an instant. Every second will mean many lives. I 'm going with you to whatever end there is, and I 'm not afraid."

Brown Betty's flanks were steaming. The froth from her mouth flecked her neck and legs and body, to be quickly washed off by the drenching rain. Behind them they could hear, coming nearer and nearer, the fateful roar of the rushing waters. The canyon walls opened out, and, looming vaguely in the dim light, they could see the first houses of the town. With full lungs Conrad shouted at the top of his voice:

"Run! A cloudburst! A cloudburst is coming! Run for your lives!"

They dashed on, and the houses became more frequent. There were lights in the windows, though it was little past mid-afternoon. Curtis, shouting his warning over and over, put the bridle in Lucy's hands and drew his revolver. They were rushing down the main street, through the most thickly built portion of the town. Pointing upward, he added the noise of pistol shots to his clamor. Men and women came to their doors, caught the meaning of his cries, heard the roar of the coming flood, and rushed out and

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up the side streets, shouting warnings as they ran.

"My father — the bank — can we go so far?" asked Lucy breathlessly.

"Yes — we 'll call him," Conrad assured her, glancing back over his shoulder. Behind them rose a din of shouts and yells and screams of terror, mingling with the peals of thunder and the roar of the waters. The street was full of people running this way and that. And a little farther back, through the dusky light, he saw a brown, foaming wall of water, its crest topping the roofs of the houses, its front a mass of half-engulfed trees and houses and pieces of lumber and arms and legs and bodies of men and animals that boiled up from its foot, tossed and whirled a moment on its breast, and sank into the flood.

Curtis ground his teeth together. They were still three blocks from the bank. "We 'll never make it," he thought; "but we 'll try!" His arm gathered Lucy closer to his breast, his spur touched Brown Betty's heaving flank, and with another loud shout of warning and an encouraging cry to the mare they darted on with a fresh burst of speed.

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CHAPTER XXV

FULFILMENT OF THE LAW

LOUISE DENT sank back upon her pillows as Lucy hurried from the room, too amazed and horrified for speech by the girl's declaration of her love for Curtis Conrad and her determination to reveal to him her father's identity. Ill in body, distracted in mind almost to the point of irresponsibility, her thoughts tossed about and took wild shapes in her fevered brain. The one idea looming constantly before her was that Bancroft was in deadly, imminent peril. Her bitter resentment against Conrad and the hate and anger she had nursed so long in secret distorted all her conception of his character. Now, as her thoughts pounded back and forth through her dizzy, aching head, he seemed to her to be capable of any monstrous deed. He would learn from Lucy the secret of her father's identity, and then nothing would prevent him from rushing forthwith to get his fill of bloody vengeance.

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She rose and staggered to the window. Dark clouds were overspreading the sky. It would rain soon, they would turn back from their ride, and he would bring her home. Then he would hasten to the bank, and into Aleck's room — and she covered her eyes as if to conceal what her mental vision insisted on seeing. If Aleck only knew that Curtis had learned the truth, if he could be warned in time, he might conceal himself until it would be possible for him to go away. Leave the town he must, and go far, far away, where there would be no fear of discovery.

She alone knew his danger. But could she tell him that she was aware of his secret? She shrank from making him suffer that humiliation. Furthermore, could she do it without betraying her own secret, without laying bare the love that burned in her heart? Yet — what mattered the rest if she could save his life and, perhaps, his future? She followed with her eye the line of the canyon. Where were they now? The clouds were black and lowering and a gray veil of rain hid the purple of the distant mountains and spread an advancing blur over their slopes. If she was to save Aleck she must go — at once.

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Her loud and hurried knocking at the door of Bancroft's private office sent to his heart the quick apprehension to which he had become an easy prey. He sprang to his feet with his hand upon the revolver that of late lay always ready upon his desk. Not only was it a relief to find that it was nobody but Louise, but the very sight of her was so welcome and so easeful to his overwrought and desperate mind that unconsciously he addressed her by her Christian name. Her wild eyes and distraught face alarmed him.

"Louise! What is the matter? You have come in all this rain? How wet you are! Has anything happened?"

"No; not now; not yet! Wait, let me get my breath — I will tell you. Aleck, how pale you are! Has anything happened to you?" In their excitement neither of them noticed that she also used his Christian name.

"No; nothing has happened to me — no more than usual. I am in deep trouble, Louise."

"I know, I know," she cried, coming close to him. "I know what it is — I have come to warn you. Curtis Conrad — "

"What about him?" Bancroft exclaimed,

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starting back. "What do you know about him?"

"What you know, Aleck — that he means to kill you. He is coming here this very afternoon — he will be here soon — he will kill you. You must hide from him!"

He drew back as she spoke, and then turned sharply upon her. "Do you know why? Are you another who knows?"

She moved a step aside and dropped her gaze, but her voice was tender and compassionate as she replied, "Yes, Aleck; I know."

He looked at her with astonished eyes. "How did you find it out? How long have you known?"

"For years," she said softly, stretching her hand impulsively toward him. "Josephine told me when she died, so I could guard Lucy against all knowledge of it. I have kept it as secret as the grave. Nobody has ever had from me any suspicion of the truth. It has made no difference to me, Aleck! I have only respected you the more, because you could begin over again and build up a new name and a new life."

He took her hand. It was wet and cold, and he folded it in his, and as she went on drew her closer to his side. He felt the

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soothing comfort of her words and manner, but his eyes were on the floor as he muttered, "I thought nobody knew; I thought it was hidden so well!"

The room had grown dark and darker. Outside, the rain was coming down in gray sheets, and dazzling flashes of lightning flooded the heavens. Peal upon peal of thunder smote their ears. She thought, "They are at home by this time; he will be here soon." Laying her other hand upon Bancroft's arm she hurried on, in broken, pleading speech: "Aleck, you must not stay here! You must hide somewhere, where he cannot find you! Conrad — I came to warn you — he knows, by this time — who you are. He will be here soon."

"Conrad! Does he know? Are you sure?"

"Yes. They went to ride up the canyon, he and Lucy. She said she was going to tell him. Aleck, you must not stay here! He may come any minute!"

He dropped her hand and started back. "Lucy!" he cried, and again, "Lucy! Does she know, too?" He sank into his chair and buried his face in his arms. Louise stood beside him, her hand upon his shoulder, her voice soft with loving compassion.

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"I don't know how she knew, nor how long she has known. Until this afternoon I had no idea that she, or any one, knew anything about it. But she came to my room and told me that she was going to ride with him, that she loved him, and that she was going to tell him who you are."

He made no answer; but she guessed by his troubled breathing with what shame and despair he was struggling. She bent over him, her arm across his shoulder, her cheek upon his hair. Above the pealing, echoing thunder and the rattling boom of some sound which in their absorption they had scarcely noted, there came into the room the sudden din of cries and shouts and pistol shots.

"It's Conrad! He's coming!" cried Louise, running to the window, her excited mind still dominated by the single idea. Bancroft grasped the pistol. Looking back, she saw him point it at his own temple. Springing to his side, she seized it with both hands, crying out, "Aleck, don't do that! Don't give up! Give it to me!"

His grasp relaxed and she took the weapon from his hand.

"Aleck! Bancroft! Aleck!" they heard from outside, in Conrad's voice. More words

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followed, but through the noise of the shouting and the thunder and that rattling roar, now grown louder and nearer, they could distinguish only, "your life!" A galloping horse rushed near the window, there was a pistol shot without, and an answering shot from within.

A shriek pierced the clamor, and Bancroft cried, "That was Lucy's voice!" By a flash of lightning which rent for an instant the gray darkness, they saw the horse wheel into the hill street, and saw Lucy in Conrad's arms.

The pistol dropped from Louise's hand as she cried out in a passion of grief, "Oh, Aleck! Our little girl! Have I killed her?"

He leaned toward her with compassionate arms.

Conrad glanced over his shoulder as he wheeled his mare into the cross street, and saw the towering wall of water at their very heels. Brown Betty was staggering under her burden, but with shout and spur he drove her on up the steep incline. A grinding crash mingled with the roar of the flood, and another backward glance let him see the bank building toppling, collapsing, embosomed in the awful avalanche of water. A great wave

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rushed after them and swept Brown Betty from her feet. Had the mare been less sturdy of spirit they would have been carried back on its retreating current. But Conrad's persuading, encouraging calls were in her ears and she struck out bravely, swimming against the force of the waves that swirled about them and buffeted her with the debris they carried. But the waters that spread up the cross street soon lost their force, and she regained her footing. Curtis bent over Lucy, saying, "We are safe now, sweetheart!" Blood was dripping over her garments, and she lay white and still upon his arm.

At last they reached the door of the Bancroft home, and Curtis carried Lucy, still unconscious, within, and went in search of Miss Dent. But the house was deserted. Alone, he ministered to the girl's needs. He located the injury, and found that a bullet, as to whose source and intention he made his own secret guess, had pierced her arm, but had left merely a flesh wound. Recovered from her swoon, he carried her up-stairs and left her to change her wet clothing while he went in search of blankets. Wrapped in these, with her arm bandaged, he left her in bed while he hastened down the hill, hoping to find news

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of her father and Miss Dent with which to relieve her anxiety.

The rain had ceased and the flood had passed, leaving in its wake the wreck of a ruined town. Where the bank building had stood were tottering walls and a shapeless heap of brick and timbers. Beneath the wreckage, where had been the president's office, they found the bodies of Bancroft and Louise, enfolded in each other's arms.

The sky cleared and only in the east did some low-lying clouds, still wet and angry, give any hint of the storm which had swept over the town and left desolation in its track. As Conrad climbed the hill to tell Lucy of her double bereavement, in the tenderest words his love could make possible, he faced the glories of a setting sun whose resplendent pageant filled the sky and touched with its glowing colors the pitiful devastation of the little valley.

THE END

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